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**IMAGINATION**

STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

FEBRUARY, 1954

35¢

**Planet of Dread**

By DWIGHT V. SWAIN



# Introducing the



# AUTHOR



*Sherwood Springer*



“W HAT’S your background in the science fiction field?” somebody has asked.

Well, there was that incident way back in grammar school, for example, when, in some manner, I was maneuvered into a position of ordering a number of new titles for the room’s library shelf with funds other kids and myself had raised by means of bake sales, paper drives, etc. The grammar school teacher, pleased with our industriousness, handed me a long list of classics he considered would be worthy additions and gave me carte blanche to make the final selections. How trusting he was!

I took the money and bought the school a shelf full of Edgar Rice Burroughs.

Another milestone came during high school commencement. By chance, I was selected to deliver one of the orations and was offered a list of traditionally approved subjects from which to make a choice. For the next two weeks I resorted to desperate subterfuges to stall off a persistent principal who kept demanding an advance draft of my address. Naturally, it was already completed, but I had misgivings about trusting it to his scrutiny too soon. Finally, the day before the exercises, he landed on me like a load of bricks. Either I produce a copy of the address or I wouldn’t be permitted to give it. I knew that he knew there was no time left to write another, so I produced.

For a minute I thought the man

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# IMAGINATION

*Stories  
of Science  
and Fantasy*

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# The Editorial

**D**O you ever pick up your daily newspaper and have the feeling that the headlines and feature stories may be tomorrow's obituaries? There's much talk these days about H bombs, for example. An H bomb can destroy an area with a ten mile radius; if one of them ever hit Manhattan a colossal city would be turned into a colossal graveyard. The Indians may have sold it to the White Man for ten bucks at one time, but after an H bomb hit it the whole shebang wouldn't be worth a counterfeit penny. Besides, there wouldn't be any Indians left to buy.

**T**HE above holds true for any city on the face of the Earth. And there isn't one city that can boast of being immune to such a catastrophe. On top of it all the H bomb is just an intermediate step to the next more powerful weapon. There is talk even now of the coming C bomb—the Cobalt bomb. This modest implement of destruction may have ten times the effect of an H bomb! Which means simply that some of our smaller states would cease to exist if a C bomb hit them . . . This is the world of tomorrow?

**A**LL this is predicated upon the possibility of a "hot" war eventually following the "cold" one now in process. We certainly hope it never happens because this plan-

et might suddenly appear to be a brightly lit neon tube to some galactic observer. We have nothing against neon tubes; they are quite pleasing to the eye when lit. We do recoil from the thought that we might be some of the atoms engaged in the lighting. What then is the solution to the world's problem?

**Y**OU'VE got to take a look at man's history to understand that there really isn't a permanent solution—unless it be complete annihilation, in which case there is no longer a problem. The ironic fact appears to be that men have always fought, and in all likelihood will continue to do so in the eras to come. The political parties may change, and/or the powers that be. But whatever new ones arise, some will covet their neighbor as have those in the past. It's a vicious circle due to man's innate stupidity—he can never be satisfied and let well enough alone.

**P**RIOR to this 20th century the situation was not so alarming. There were always new fields to explore or exploit. Too, the weapons in existence were trivial by today's standards, making any major war in essence a local affair. Today there are no new areas of the Earth to investigate and plant the flag thereon. The whole real estate development is sold out; the

problem now is to keep the claim jumpers off the homestead — or somebody else's. We're doing a creditable job thus far, but how long can we hope to continue before the whole thing blows up in our collective faces? That's the problem as we see it—not *today*, but *tomorrow*. With our rapid technological advances that tomorrow can be a frightening thing.

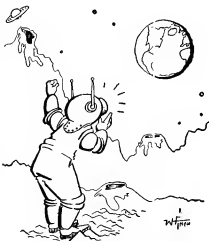
**T**OMORROW doesn't have to come, at least not in the disastrous way one looks at it today. What is this grand panacea? Horace Greeley once said, "Go West, young man!" Today we say, "Go up!" . . . There's the Moon—Venus—Mars—just to name a few for a start. There's lots of land up there, vast new frontiers waiting for man to tap their vaster resources. And the point is, man can do it in this century—if he wants to!

**F**ORGET the hogwash about the Moon being unfit because of a lack of atmosphere — or Mars or Venus not having an ideal one for human lungs. Ever hear of a sealed-beam headlamp? We make those blindfolded to keep air out. With our tremendous scientific advancement a sealed-dome colony (to keep air in) is no longer a practical impasse. And for travel between colonies we have spacesuits for the individual. Air supply no problem—except the time, expense, and effort put forth to insure it. The same goes for transportation to and from these other worlds. We can do it—if we put our minds and money to that end. Sure it will cost like hell—but it will prevent a

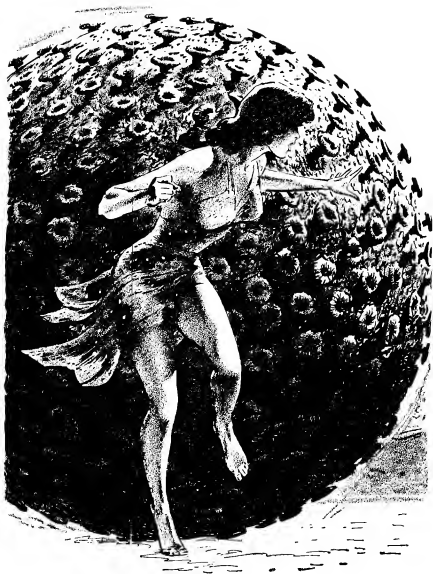
possible hell on Earth by diverting attention to vast new colonies waiting for the foot of man.

**S**PACE travel would not end war; men will probably fight over sections of other planets in the future; the point is they won't be fighting each other on Earth. Political haggling, yes. But that we can endure safely. And the big thing to remember is that all this will take many decades to resolve beyond the colonist stage. It will take centuries before inter-world consolidation will bring things to another major crisis. And when that time comes man can look to the stars . . .

**S**O what are we waiting for? Sustained peace (and the prosperity of great new industries) is upstairs. Who'll trot out the ladder? . . .



"To hell with taxes, you hear me — To hell with taxes!"



Surrounded by its many suns, Lysor scorned Federation rule and plotted the destruction of our galaxy. So Craig Nesom came in a starship to this —

# PLANET OF DREAD

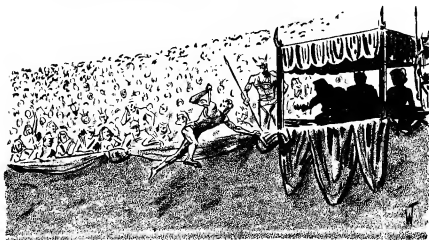
*By*

*Dwight V. Swain*

**F**ACE slack, eyes glazed with terror, the Baemae wench came forward through the gate into the walled ring.

An appreciative murmur ran

through the crowd. As one, the assembled Kukzubas barons and their ladies pressed closer about the pit-rail, tense and eager with anticipation.



High on his dais, Lord Zenaor chuckled. "A pretty thing, is she not, Vydys?" he queried of the woman who sat beside him, dark vision of sinister beauty.

Hot with strange passion, the woman's eyes clung to the cringing figure in the pit. The pink tip of her tongue flicked at her lips. "If you can see your way to calling any Baemae woman pretty. For my part, I prefer her in her proper role, as prey here in the games."

"S—?" Lord Zenaor raised a mocking coal-black eyebrow. "No wonder they call you 'Vydys the Crue' behind your back, my dear! If you had your way, there'd soon be no Baemae left alive to serve us."

Visibly, Vydys stiffened. Her head came round—dark eyes flashing, jet hair ashimmer; and when she spoke her words were edged with fury. "Have a care, Zenaor! I've no taste for taunts, even from the chief of barons."

"The truth is no taunt." Zenaor gave not a fraction. "Because pain is your passion, you drive our serfs to rebellion."

"Rebellion—!" The woman's eyes glinted like crater diamonds. "How many of the Baemae have flown south with their cursed discs already, off to the djevoda ranges? There lies your rebellion—and only torture will stop it!" Her

laugh rang gall-bitter. "Or perhaps, like that Narla, you believe we should free them?"

"Keep your tongue off my daughter!" It was a command that brooked no discussion. "As for the free range, the discs, cross them off. They'll soon be no menace."

"Oh?" Vydys' lips twisted, mocking. "No doubt you have a plan, my lord Zenaor—"

"I have a plan indeed." Zenaor's tone was icy. "One word too many, and you'd die as its first step."

Vydys faltered.

"You see, my dear, our goals are different." Zenaor clipped, smiling thinly. "You insist after pain, I after power. As chief of barons, I mean to have it—and that means holding down the Baemae. But I'll waste no time on half-way measures. When I strike, it will be in my own way, and it will win. And"—now he leaned forward, close to Vydys—"and even one lovely as you shall die if in that moment she plots against me."

Vydys' nostrils flared. But before she could speak, the chief of barons turned away. He raised his voice till it echoed through the great vaulted hall. "Wench! Are you ready?"

Below him, in the ring, the Bae-



mae girl's lips moved in a soundless agony of panic.

A ripple of laughter rose from the crowd. Packed bodies shifted and pressed tighter. Hungrily, mercilessly, a thousand eyes appraised the evening's victim.

Zenaor said, "Wench, tonight you meet the Lady Vydys' roller. If you survive, I'll make a place for you in my own harem. If not . . ." He shrugged; turned back to Vydys. "My dear—"

Vydys' high, proud breasts rose on a quick-drawn breath. Lithely, she twisted in her seat. "My helm, seri!"

The rawboned Baemae youth who wore her livery lifted the ornate metal headdress from its case; stepped forward. His face was pale, sweat-beaded. His hands trembled.

Vydys' eyes distended. "Why do you shake so, carrion?"

The youth's voice quavered. "She—that girl . . ." He floundered, groped. "She—she is my sister, Lady Vydys."

"Your sister!" The mask of anger fell away from Vydys' face. "You mean she is of your blood? You love her?"

Mutely, the serfman nodded.

"And you would suffer were she to meet my roller?"

Again, the liveried Baemae's head moved in silent affirmation.

A LIGHT gleamed deep in Vydys' eyes, all dark and evil. Once more, she ran the small, pink tongue along her lips, as if savoring the tension of the moment.

"You—you will spare her—?" The youth's words came out a hoarse, cracked whisper.

"Spare her—and spoil the evening's entertainment?" The Lady Vydys' ripe lips curved in a small, slow smile that was straight from hell. "Surely, seri, you would not ask that of me!" And then: "Place my helm upon me."

A new tremor ran through the serving-serf. Wordless, he slid the shining metal casing down over the jet hair, seated it carefully upon the woman's head.

Approvingly, she nodded. "Now, seat yourself before me—here, where I can watch your face."

Stiff-lipped, the youth obeyed.

Vydys laughed softly; turned to Zenaor. "You see, my lord? Down there in the ring will be the wench, pitting herself against my roller; while here close by me sits her brother, suffering with her. It offers a new kind of titillat on!"

Zenaor shrugged. "As you will it."

Eyes sparkling, Vydys leaned forward. "Let in the roller!"

An iron gate lifted. A faceted four-foot sphere bowled slowly out of the shadowed passage into the

walled ring.

The roller.

A strange creature, in any evolutionary pattern. Its surface was completely covered with leathery, inch-wide octagonal pads, each centered with a third-inch cup that served as combined mouth and mode of movement. For through these cups it both took nourishment and pulled itself in whatever direction it sought to go by applying differential suction to the surface on which it rested.

Now, in the center of the ring, it hesitated; paused there, teetering, like some great ball come to rest.

The Baemae girl caught her breath, the sound rasping overloud in the sudden hush that had fallen upon the crowd. Eyes wild and wice, she shrank back against the wall, hands splayed out flat against the polished duroid surface.

Still smiling, Vydys spoke to her victim—gentle, coaxing: "This is a game wench—a game betwixt you and me. Do not fear the roller. In itself it is harmless, a mere ball of flesh with so little brain that it barely knows enough to feed. But through this helm"—she touched her headdress—"my thoughts can project waves that stimulate its nervous system, so that it moves wherever I may will

it. You understand?"

The girl below gave no sign that she had even heard.

Vydys pressed on: "So, now, I'll spin the roller at you, while you try to dodge it. That is the game. To win, you have only to leap atop the thing and scale the ring-wall."

Among the barons, someone laughed aloud, harsh and explosive.

The Baemae youth who was the victim's brother buried his face in his hands.

Still the girl in the pit said nothing. She seemed to have eyes only for the roller.

Zenaor's black brows drew together. "Get on with it!"

Vydys murmured, "The game begins . . ." Her face set in a mask of concentration.

Down in the ring, the roller began to move once more. Slowly at first, then faster, it bowled around in a long curve.

The girl slid along the wall, keeping space between her and the creature.

Vydys' lips parted, peeled back over sharp white teeth. Her fingers wrapped tight around the throne-arm.

The roller swerved sharply. Gathering speed, it hurtled towards the girl.

She darted sideways.

The roller struck the wall with

a meaty thud. Then, rotating so rapidly its pad-facets blurred, it raced along the pitside, close on its victim's heels.

The girl gave a small, shrill cry of panic, and fled across the center of the ring.

Again the roller spun; lanced after her.

THE girl threw herself aside barely in time. The roller missed her by scant inches. Racing on, once more it struck the ringwall, even harder than before . . . caromed off like a huge ball bouncing . . . hurtled back, straight at the girl.

She stumbled to the left, seeking desperately to dodge it.

The roller veered.

The girl screamed; twisted.

But not quite far enough, nor fast enough. One side of the speeding roller ticked her; knocked her backward. She sprawled in a heap on the ring's floor.

The crowd roared; strained forward.

Up on the dais, the Baemae youth surged to his feet—fists clenched, face working.

Vydys laughed aloud . . . a throaty chortle, somehow hideous, more befitting fiend than woman. "Ah, Zenaor! Was that not well turned?" Her features shone with strange, evil radiance.

The chief of barons struggled, face wooden.

Down in the ring, the roller came to rest. Panting, shaking, the Baemae girl scrambled to her feet.

Vydys' smooth brow furrowed. Slowly, the roller began to move again—in a spiral, this time, circling and converging on its fear-straight prey.

Sobbing, the girl tottered backward.

Swiftly, the roller changed course . . . spun towards her.

The girl fled, running off wildly at right angles, not even pausing to look behind her.

Veering once more, the roller raced to intercept her. Too late, the girl threw a mad glance back over her shoulder.

But now the roller was upon her, striking at her legs even as she tried to spring aside. There was the brittle *crack* of a femur snapping. A scream — high, shrill, alive with surging terror.

The crowd shrieked its delight.

Only then a new voice slashed through the uproar: "No—! No!"

The roller thudded against the wall; lay still. Heads came round, searching for the shouter.

They found him on the dais, with Vydys and Zenaor. It was the Baemae youth, the downed girl's brother. "Curse you!" he shouted, face white with fury. "Curse

you all, you vermin!"

He turned as he yelled; started toward's Vydys.

She went rigid. Beside her, the Lord Zenaor brought up his hand in a quick, tight gesture.

Guards lunged forward, weapons drawn and ready.

The youth whipped a knife from beneath his livery. Slashing, he leaped back, eyes rolling wildly.

But there was no escape . . . only the closing circle of hard-faced guards with their leveled fire-guns.

The youth's face set in a sort of feverish desperation. Whirling, he charged down from the dais, straight for the walled ring.

Cur'es rang from the barons, shrieks from their ladies. Bellowing, trampling, they threw themselves clear of the flashing blade.

The youth reached the ring-wall. For an instant he poised atop it, wavering. Then, tight-lipped, he leaped down into the pit itself and stumbled to the side of his fallen sister.

The crowd breathed again.

On the dais, Vydys tensed and gripped the throne-arms till her knuckles gleamed white as djevoda ivory. The scarlet lips quivered in a grimace of hate.

Below, the roller lurched into motion. A thousand crushing, crippling pounds of flesh and gris-

tle, gaining momentum with every second, it spun across the ring.

The youth leaped to meet it. Savagely, he slashed at the thing's leathery outer hide.

But the pads turned away his blade. Ball-like, not even slowing, the sphere knocked him aside as, moments earlier, it had the girl.

Then, while he still fought for balance, it was past him, hurtling ever faster . . . thundering towards the spot where his sister lay in a huddled heap upon the floor.

She tried to rise. Failed.

The rocketing roller cut short her scream.

Then the creature was bowling to a stop on the ring's far side. A hush fell over the great vaulted hall.

**S**TIFFLY, the rawboned Baemae youth dragged himself up from the place where he had fallen. Wordless, shambling, he crossed the pit to where the crumpled, broken thing that had been his sister lay; he knelt there beside her for a moment.

Then he arose again and stared up at the packed, engulfing mass of Kukzubas barons and their ladies . . . looked on beyond and above them to the dais—to Vydys and to Zenaor.

The silence echoed.

Thick-voiced, he spoke, then:

"You've killed her, curse you—you filth that call yourselves Kukzubas barons!"

"True, carrion." This from dark Vydys. "And now you die beside her!"

She concentrated. The roller turned, wending its blood-trailing way out from the wall once more.

But incredibly, the youth who wore Vydys' black-and-silver liv-ery gave the gore-drenched thing no heed. Slowly at first, then faster and faster, his shoulders shook till he burst out in a wild gale of laughter.

"So I die!" It was the mirth of a madman. "Go on, you fools! Kill me! But I die holding a secret that spells your doom, also!"

Up on the dais, Lord Zenaor stiffened. He caught Vydys' arm. "Wait! Hold back the roller!"

The youth raved on: "Our day is coming, you cutthroats—the day of the Baemae! We have summoned one who will sit in judgment on you, a man from the far Federation! Already, this moment, his starship approaches—"

Zenaor surged from his seat. His bull-roar filled the hall: "The night's games are over! I, Zenaor, decree it!" And then, to his guardsmen: "Take that serf to my chambers!"

The crowd swirled in tumult. Dark Vydys turned on him. "You

cannot—!"

"I can, and I do!"

For a moment their eyes locked . . . 'a taut, vibrant moment.

Then the woman looked away. "If you will it . . ." The words came out sullen.

But already Zenaor was turning, striding off through the light-wall that served as backdrop for the dais, away to the force-shaft that led to his quarters.

Out again at the seventh level, he stalked into the living-chambers.

His daughter, Narla, seated by an antique scanner unit, looked up as he entered, grey eyes cool and speculative. "What—? Is the evening's butchery over already?" Scorn was in her voice.

Zenaor's fists knotted. "Once too often you'll tempt me to violence, daughter." Pivoting, he stepped to a wall-stand, slopped taxal into a bor-glass, and drank it down.

The girl's brows drew together in the slightest of frowns. Rising in one smooth, graceful motion that set her flaxen hair to shimmering in the caron-light, she followed the chief of barons into the next room. "Is something wrong, father? Were Vydys' tastes more than usually hideous tonight?"

The shaft-bell clanged before Zenaor could answer. Stepping

around his daughter, he strode back to the entrance.

**A**LREADY, guards were dragging in the rawboned Baemae youth from the pit. Blood smeared his right cheek. Shackles hung heavy upon him.

"Good," Zenaor nodded. "Leave the serf with me, and return to your quarters."

The guard in charge stared. "Leave him with you—alone?"

"Alone."

The guard shot the Lord Zenaor a quick, sidelong glance. Then, saluting smartly, he about-faced and left the chambers, followed by his fellows.

Curiosity flickered in Narla's grey eyes. "Father—"

He turned on her, stony-faced. "You, too."

"I—?"

"You go to your chambers—and stay there. I wish to be alone with the prisoner."

The girl opened her mouth as if to speak, then closed it again. Flushing slightly under her father's cold, impassive gaze, she stepped through the light-wall into her own quarters.

Now, at last, Zenaor faced the shackled Baemae.

"You know, of course, that you are doomed to die?"

Mutely, the youth nodded.

"Yet there are ways and ways of dying. Slowly, painfully. Quick, clean, easy."

The serf said nothing.

"There are things I would know—things that have to do with Baemae treason." Zenaor's lips drew thin. The black eyes were never colder. "What is this nonsense of someone coming from across the void, from the Federation? You know there are no grounds—that the Federation holds no jurisdiction!"

All the fire seemed to have gone out of the youth. He shrugged sullenly. "All I know is that a one called Tumek learned of some new weapon you planned to use against the free Baemae in the djevoda lands to the south. Secretly, then, he sent word to the Federation, saying that if you ever used the thing you planned, it would imperil all other worlds as well as ours."

No flicker of emotion showed in Zenaor's lean, high-boned face. "And do you believe him?"

"Who am I to know or judge? Baemae are only good for dying!" The youth gave vent to a bitter laugh. "But at least the far Federation thought the peril was worth a starship."

"And the man—the one they send to weigh the facts here?"

"His name is Craig Nesom. I

know no more than that about him."

Silence. An eddying sort of silence that crept in from the walls and up from the floors and down out of the ceiling.

Then, abruptly, the Lord Zenaor laughed.

"So you'll die," he clipped. "But at least you shall go knowing that you're the only man, Baemae or baron, to learn the truth about my weapon. You shall judge it for me with your dying breath—prove to me that it can truly give me power and strength for conquest . . ."

He was striding away even as he spoke—striding across the room to a wall set off with a delicate interlay of panels.

One slid aside beneath his hand. Beyond lay a chill, bleak laboratory chamber.

Still smiling, Zenaor led the shackled Baemae forward . . . shoved him through a port-like door into a transparent cubicle mounted on a stand.

"Now . . . one moment . . ." With quick efficiency, the chief of barons closed the cubicle's door and sealed it. Then, taking a tiny glass ampule from the nearest bench, he dropped it into a slot atop the cubicle and brought down a crusher valve upon it.

THE ampule splintered. For an instant light glinted on sparkling, dust-like grains descending, floating out in lazy spirals through the sealed cubicle's still air.

But only for an instant. For then, suddenly, the grains were growing, uniting, multiplying, melding. In a finger-snap, grey slime began to form on the unit's glistening, sterile floor.

A slime that swirled and crawled and eddied . . .

The shackled serfman screamed.

Not that anyone could hear it. The cubicle was far too skillfully designed for that.

With grim satisfaction, cold appraisal, the Lord Zenaor watched the slime-tide rippling higher. Carefully, he noted reaction time . . . the victim's grimaces and contortions and frantic terror.

So preoccupied was he that he didn't even hear Narla approaching till her voice rang out behind him, raw with sudden shock: "*Our-obos—!*"

Zenaor spun by instinct.

His daughter's lovely face showed stiff with horror. "Father . . ." She choked; retched.

Cold-eyed he waited till the spasm had passed before he spoke: "So . . . you find my secret shocking?"

"Shocking—?" The girl's eyes

held disbelief. Then: "Father, not even Vydys would do such! To bring those horrors here from Xurnar—" She shuddered. "You would not! You dare not—"

"I dare not?" Zenaor laughed harshly; gestured to the cubicle, and the dying serfman engulfed in slime. "I have already done it!"

"Then—you would destroy our world—the Baemae?" The girl's voice was queer, choked.

"Are there only Baemae, then, on Lysor?" Anger carved Zenaor's jaw-line deeper, sharper. "I am of the Kukzubas, Narla; the barons! My loyalty is to them, for from them I draw my power."

"Your power!" Narla came erect at the word. "There is the answer, father! Your loyalty is not to the barons or to Lysor, but to power alone. You live for it. You bow before no other god."

"And so?" Zenaor stood inflexible as duroid.

The girl gestured helplessly. "What can I say, when not even the fate of our world can touch you?"

"Our world—this puny dot that men call Lysor?" Zenaor laughed aloud. "This planet of ours means nothing, Narla! By using the slime-things, the ourobos, I can reach out across the void till even the far Federation's chiefs will tremble! Nothing can stop me!

Nothing!"

"I see." Narla's face was pale now, and her lips quivered. But she stood proud and erect. "Then I have no choice, father. My loyalty is to Lysor. I shall fulfill it."

"Even against me?"

"Even against you."

"So Vydys was right . . ." The chief of barons' coal-black eyes gleamed hard and bitter. "Very well, then. As of this moment you shall be treated as a prisoner—"

The clang of a com-box bell cut in upon him. Zenaor left his sentence hanging; flicked the switch. "Yes?"

"My lord, a starship seeks to land here."

"A starship—?" Zenaor stiffened.

"Yes, my lord. The message says it bears an envoy from the Federation."

"His name?"

"Craig Nesom."

Slowly, Zenaor straightened. Cold-eyed, he glanced to the glassite cubicle . . . the dead serfman, swallowed up in the pulsing slime-mass of the ourobos. He was hardly aware that Narla was stepping quietly from the laboratory chamber.

Again, the voice from the com-box: "My lord . . ."

Harsh-voiced, face set, Zenaor threw back his answer: "Let them



land." And then, beneath his breath: "But blasting off alive will be another matter!"

## CHAPTER II

**S**HE was the loveliest creature Craig Nesom had ever seen.

Or perhaps that was only the hunger gnawing in him—the Earth-hunger, the aching loneliness that comes to all men who dare to roam the far void to the stars.

Yet here he stood, on this strange, mediaevalish world of Ly-sor.

And here *she* stood before him, smiling.

Suddenly, to Craig Nesom, it didn't matter that they were met in an alien city called Torneulan, or that she was Narla, daughter of Lord Zenaor, whose rule here he had come to question. The crowd's clamor, the bizarre costumes, the twin suns blazing like green balls of fire against an emerald sky—what did they count now? For gazing into this slim girl's eyes, he could almost forget duty and the Federation and the starship, the darkling dreams of friends and homeland.

She said, "*Tarata, jodal . . .* Welcome, voyager," and he was glad that she paused and smiled and spoke . . . glad for the psych-men's hypnoscanner treatment that

let him understand her words, her meaning.

He matched her pleasantry. "This drink called taxat—will you join me for one?"

"A taxat—?" Her eyes canted. She took his arm. "Of course."

Only then, though her lips still curved, the grey eyes seemed to shadow. Her voice dropped and now, all at once, it held a note of bitterness, of tension: "If death stays its hand long enough for us to drink it."

He stared. "*What—?*"

The shadow vanished. His companion laughed softly; tossed her head in a gesture old as woman, so that the shimmering blonde hair swirled and rippled. Only in her whisper did the dark undercurrent still show through: "Please, come! Do not let your face betray us!"

For the fraction of a second Craig hesitated, weighing her with his eyes. Of a sudden he was acutely aware of alien sounds and smells and voices.

Only then the girl whispered, "Please . . ." again. Her eyes held mute entreaty.

Stiff, wordless, Craig let her lead him through the throng and din of the assembled barons and their ladies . . . out of the emerald sunlight, along the shadowy porticos of the tower itself.

The Central Tower. The Tower of Zenaor.

The girl darted a quick glance back over her shoulder, then whispered "Hurry! We must get out before they realize that we are missing!" Catching Craig's hand in hers, half-running, she pulled him through the nearest door, into the massive building.

There were corridors, then, and stairs and ramps, all leading downward, till at last they moved along a dusty, dim-lit passageway that seemed to stretch forever, echoing and empty.

Abuptly, Craig pulled the girl up short. "It's time for explanations," he clipped flatly.

The grey eyes rose to meet his, cool and steady. "You came to Lysor on complaint of Tumeek, did you not?"

"Yes."

And he charged that my father planned aggression that might endanger even your Federation?"

Again, Craig nodded.

The girl leaned close. "Do you realize what that means, Craig Nesom? Can you imagine to what lengths the barons will go in order to keep you from reaching Tumeek?"

"But—"

A sudden echo of distant voices cut short Craig's answer. The girl went rigid.

"Quick!" Her voice hissed taut, now; ragged. "This may be your only chance to contact Tumeek—if it is not too late already!"

After that there was no more time for words; only a hurrying through the silent passage, till at last a ramp loomed before them and they came out into the day once more.

HERE the tower loomed distant and forbidding, a stark shaft lancing up like a spear-head into the emerald sky. Here were the slums, the quarters of the Baemae, with noise and filth and sweat-drenched bodies that stank rank enough to turn the stomach of any Kukzubas baron.

Wordless, still gripping his hand, the girl who was Zenaor's daughter led Craig into a low, cramped wineshop. Dirt scuffed up under his feet. Boisterous voices rang out in shouts and curses, and the stench of stale liquor hung all-pervasive. A couple reeled past, clinging to each other for support. The woman's brief halter hung loose. She was laughing drunkenly, and her near-naked body shone slick with sweat. Beyond her, a man prodded a huge, weird, spider-like lifeform into a shuffling dance atop a table.

Craig's jaw tightened. What was he doing in a place like this?

How foolish could even a Federation agent get?

But the girl's grey eyes still pleaded. Tense, raw-nerved, Craig followed her through the crowd and din to a table in the wineshop's farthest corner.

A gaunt, stoop-shouldered older man paused beside them. He wore the tabard of the serf-class. "Yes?"

"Taxat." The girl spoke for Craig. Her fingers pressed hard against his arm. Her whisper held a note almost of panic: "Quick! Smile, Craig Nesom—before the baron's men suspect the truth and sweep down on us!"

Craig flicked a glance across the room. For the first time he became aware of the presence of solitary loungers—cold-faced, tight-lipped men who stood close by the walls, nursing stale drinks.

Their eyes were on him.

The back of his neck prickled. He bared his teeth in a thin, bleak grin. "I might play better if I knew the game," he murmured beneath his breath.

"Oh—?" the girl exclaimed, too loudly. She shot Craig a low-lashed, coquettish glance and pushed closer, sliding her hand over his. Her lips barely moved. "Later, you madman! For now, look at me as men look at woman!"

She drew back as she spoke, flaunting her slim young body's charms before him in a sinuous,

sensuous motion. Her face was a pale oval cameo of loveliness. Temptation, incarnate, came to life in the lithe twist of her torso.

Craig caught his breath. "You devil—!"

The red lips quivered. "You see? You learn quickly!" The girl relaxed, leaned against him. "Make love to me, voyager. Your arms—put them about me. Kiss me . . ."

A numbness gripped Craig. His hands trembled.

But the girl's bare leg and hip pressed hard against him. Her hair brushed his cheek, soft as perfumed silk, and her skin was smoother than any satin. "Are you afraid of me, then, Craig Nesom?"

"Damn you!" he choked.

Only then her cool fingers slid beneath his uniform jacket, and all at once his heart was pounding, pounding. The room, the noise, the cold-eyed loungers—they faded till he could think of nothing but the ripe lips and their invitation.

It was the loneliness, he told himself; the old Earth-hunger.

And here was this woman, Zen-aor's own daughter, the antidote, his for the taking.

He would have strained her to him, then, in spite of all his doubts and thoughts of Federation rules and duty. But now the serving-serf was back, bearing twin silver

cones of taxat.

The girl pushed away from Craig, smoothing her tousled hair. Her face was flushed. Her eyes dodged his.

A sort of senseless fury gripped him. "It's you who are afraid!" he lashed. "You bring me here. You tempt me. But then you push away again—"

The girl's eyes flashed. Once more, she leaned close. Her voice was suddenly edged and brittle. "My task is to help you get to Tumek, Earthman. To that end, and in order to help dispel suspicion, I have no choice but to act like any Kuzubas woman who would rendezvous with a lover in the Baemar quarter. But it goes no further. Now that I have brought you here, a courier will take you or to Tumek. When he comes—"

She broke off sharply, eyes flaring sudden panic. "Craig—!"

Craig hal-turned in his seat.

A MAN stood framed in the wineshop's doorway—a tall broad-shouldered man who wore a high-crowned metal helmet like none that Craig had ever seen before. His sweeping shoulder-cape bore the blaze of brocaded heraldry of Lord Zenaor's service, and his eyes, his mouth, were cruel and grim.

Now he paused on the wine-

shop's threshold, sweeping the place with a glance that held no mercy.

A hush fell over the echoing, low-ceilinged room—the hush of fear. Men's faces paled, and women shrank back as if to hide behind their partners.

Beside Craig, Narla whispered, "That man—he is my father's chief of guards, the master of the rollers! They must already guess you're on your way to Tumek—"

Once more, Craig glanced round at the doorway—and found himself staring straight into the guard-chief's eyes.

For a taut, vibrant moment the silence echoed. Then the man in the doorway lashed, "On your feet, Earthling!"

Craig felt Narla's nails dig into his arm. Her whisper hissed so faint it might have been imagination: "Window—room behind this . . ."

A knot drew tight in Craig Neson's belly. Stiffly, he rose . . . side-stepped out from behind the table.

The hush of the room was deafening now. The wineshop revelers sat like creatures frozen.

"You die now, Earthling!" snarled the guard-chief. "Here, beneath the rollers, by Lord Zenaor's own orders."

He stepped aside as he spoke. A great, bulbous sphere rolled slowly past him through the doorway.

Instinctively, Craig fell back a step.

"Stop him!" barked the guard-chief.

The words crackled. Two hard-faced loungers by the rear wall sprang forward.

Inside Craig Nesom, something snapped. It came to him, of a sudden, that here lay the answer to all his tension and loneliness and homeland hunger. Here, channeled into rage and bruising violence . . .

With a curse, he smashed a fist square into the face of the foremost of his assailants. A hoarse cry of anguish burst from the man's throat. He crashed back across the nearest table.

Like lightning, the hand of the second flashed to an ornate belt-dagger.

Craig lunged for him in chill, surging fury. Savagely, he drove his elbow into the soft flesh below the other's rib-casing.

The man reeled—retching, knife forgotten.

Craig caught him from behind by belt and shoulder . . . half-hurled him into the path of the roller that now spun forward.

Man and sphere came together with a thud of flesh against flesh.

Man went down, screaming.

But now other guardsmen were charging in. Whirling, Craig dashed for the door to the back room.

In another instant he was through it, racing for the window.

A bolt of green fire seared past his head.

He ducked.

But in the same instant, something struck his shoulder a hammer blow from behind. He sprawled on his knees. Through a strange, blurred haze of pain, it dawned on him that now his right arm hung limp and useless.

Only then hands gripped him and dragged him forward, on to the window. Incredulously, he discovered that it was the serving-serf, the grey, stoop-shouldered oldster who had brought the taxat.

"Hurry—!" the man panted. "Climb up! I am not strong enough to lift you . . ."

With a tremendous effort, Craig dragged himself erect. Clutching the high sill, he tried to pull himself up to it.

The panting serfman heaved and boosted. "Hurry! Hurry—!"

A final surge. Momentarily, Craig sagged on his belly on the sill.

The serf tugged up the hanging legs and swung them through the opening.

From behind Craig came a crash of splintering timbers, a ring of curses. He threw a dazed glance back.

Someone—the serf, perhaps?—had slammed shut a heavy door be-

tween this rear room and the wine-shop proper.

Now its bolt tore loose. The door burst inward. One of Zen-aor's men clawed past it, whipping up a weapon that might have been a pistol.

The old serf threw himself upon the guardsman.

Green fire blazed. The serf fell back.

CRAIG dropped from the window-sill into an alley. The haze of pain was clearing now. He could run again, though his right arm still traied useless at his side.

Desperate, a hunted thing, he plunged off down the passage.

More cries behind him. More green fire blazing.

But these ancient alleys were like a maze, a rabbit-warren. Given ten seconds' lead, a man had at least a gambler's chance to lose himself, find safety.

And Craig had ten seconds . . . ten seconds a grey-thatched serving serf had bought with his own life.

The knowledge brought new sickness surging through Craig—a sickness that drew no fragment from the pain of his wounded shoulder.

But he had no time for thoughts or bitterness or brooding. Not now. For him, there were only the shouts behind and the blackness of the alley.

Only then, from his backtrail, a new sound rose . . . the whisper of a roller's leathery pads spinning over the cobbles.

Craig whirled.

Running blind, caroming from wall to wall as it sped through the narrow alley, the sphere raced towards him.

Craig threw himself into the angle of the nearest doorway.

The sphere missed him by inches; hurtled on beyond.

Sweating, shaking, Craig stepped out once more.

But now the shouts came closer as guardsmen ran towards him, following up the roller.

Pivoting, Craig stumbled on once more.

Before he had taken a dozen steps, the whispering of the roller drifted to him.

The sphere was hurtling back again.

Panting, Craig wedged himself into the chimney-like shaft between two buildings.

Again, the roller passed him. The guards' shouts echoed ever-louder.

It dawned on Craig that the crevice in which he stood stretched upward, clear to a tiny wedge of emerald sky.

At least, up there, there'd be no rollers.

Wincing with pain at each movement of his wounded arm, bracing

himself with feet on one wall, back against the other, he worked his way slowly up the shaft.

The roller again. Guards below him now.

Craig held his breath.

But they passed on without an upward glance. Painfully, he worked his way still higher, till the emerald wedge widened into a shining vista.

Then—of a sudden, it seemed—he was out on a flat, sagging roof, drinking in air in great, greedy gulps.

In the same instant, a shout hammered at him. He whirled.

A guard was running towards him across one of the nearby roofs. While he watched, another appeared, then another.

Ring-like, they surrounded him, hemming him in with a circle of death.

And him with no weapon but the rooftop rubble.

Savagely, he cursed aloud—Zen-aor, and Lysor, and the Federation, and his job, and duty, and the girl called Nark; baron and Baemae, Earth-worlds and aliens.

Why should he die here, alone and forgotten?

Yet die he would: he knew that now.

But at least, it would cost them.

He fumbled up a brick-sized stone . . . took his stand against the roof-edge, spraddle-legged.

The guards closed in—warily, now, but moving ever closer.

It was in that moment that the shadow fell across him.

At first Craig thought it was a cloud that had drifted between him and the twin emerald suns.

Then he glimpsed the guards' faces, and knew it was not.

Dropping to one knee, left arm held high to shield his face, he stared up at the thing now skimming towards him.

It was a disc—a shining, circular chip somehow suspended in the sky. A man in a Baemae tabard balanced lithely on it.

Now, while Craig watched, the disc tilted and raced towards him.

A guard shouted. As one, he and his fellows lunged forward.

**C**RAIG hurled his stone. By more luck than good judgment, it caught the foremost guard square in the forehead.

The man went down like an axed ox. His fellows stopped short.

In the same instant the disc whipped round in a tight spiral close by Craig's side. "Get on! Flat between my legs . . ." The rider's voice rasped raw and urgent.

Craig threw himself aboard.

Angry cries from the guards. Green fire spurting.

A shout from the discman: "Hold tight!"

Barely in time, Craig caught the disc's rim.

For as he did so, the disc's Baemae rider shifted weight sharply. With startling suddenness, the saucer tilted to a forty-five degree angle.

Another shift. The disc cartwheeled round in a fast spin that had Craig clinging with teeth and toenails.

Then the strange craft was climbing and spinning at once, faster and faster. Even the Baemae pilot dropped to his knees and gripped the disc's edge.

They cleared the roof . . . peeled off in a wide arc that carried them out and away from the building, still climbing.

The guards' shouts welled to a furious chorus of frustration. Craig glimpsed more streaks of flame.

But they burned out far short of their target. The disc wheeled on, the whole of the ancient Baemae quarter spread out below it.

The serf's fingers dug into Craig's shoulder. He was laughing now—a fierce, bubbling chortle of triumphs. "You see, Earthman? These discs will free Lysor of its thrice-cursed barons! With your aid, Craig Nesom—"

Craig started. "You . . . know my name—?"

"Did you think I came here to save you by mere chance?" The

discman chuckled. "No. I was your contact, to help take you to Tumek. But Zenaor's guardsmen got to you before me. So I stood by and waited, in hopes I could save you."

Craig nodded slowly. "Then you can give me some answers, too—about this whole business."

"A few." The discman straightened. "But that can wait till we have landed . . ."

Skillfully, he guided the disc off, away from the city; brought it down on a tiny, brush-clotted river island. Stepping clear, he helped Craig up and gripped his hand. "They call me Bukal."

"And you know me already."

They both laughed. Then the discman's broad, bronzed face sobered. "You seek explanations . . ."

"At least, they'd help me," Craig nodded, grinning wryly.

"Then they must be brief. That Zenaor's a devil. He'll trace us in minutes, on a daylight landing." Bukal kicked the disc. "Do you know what this is?"

Craig eyed it curiously. Flat, polished, of plastic or metal, it measured a good six feet across. Beyond that, he could tell little, save that it had neither moving parts nor control equipment, so far as he could see.

"It flies, and it saved my neck," he said finally. "That's all I



know about it.

Again, Bukal laughed. A grim laugh without mirth. "Then I'll tell you rover. This thing is a weapon—a weapon of peace, one that can't kill; yet it's going to break the cursed Kukzubas barons' power forever."

"But how—?" Craig groped for words.

"How does it work, you mean?" The bronzed, stocky Bukal chuckled. "Magnetic waves—you know about them?"

"Yes, after a fashion."

"Then think of them flowing from pole to pole like some great river."

Craig stared. "You mean—these discs of yours ride the current—?"

"As chips ride a stream," the other nodded. "The secret lies in the alloy's basic pattern, its molecular structure. It serves as a filter—a trap that catches enough wave-power to lift and carry."

"And to maneuver—"

"You tilt the disc. That breaks the flow-pattern." Shifting, Craig's rescuer peered out through the brush that fringed the river's edge. He gestured. "When our visitors get closer, I'll show you."

CRAIG followed the other's movement; saw a boatload of men in guards' regalia cutting swiftly toward the islet from the river's near shore.

"They're quick," he acknowledged. And then, prompting: "You said discs were weapons."

Bukal's eyes went dark, brooding. "How much do you know of our ways here on Lysor?"

"Only that you have two groups, barons and Baemae—"

"Do you know how the barons hold their power?"

"No."

"They do it with a weapon—a barrier ray, they call it" Bukal's mouth had a bitter twist. "It sets up zones of death around the cities, the great estates—binds us to our serfdom."

"And the discs—"

"They give us a bridge across the barrier—a highway to freedom to end our thousand years of bondage!" Of a sudden a tight wolf-grin wiped the bitterness from Bukal's broad face. He surged to his feet. "Here. Let me show you!"

A cry of excitement rose from the guardsmen out on the river. The boat arced towards Craig and bronzed Bukal.

The Baemae laughed aloud. Bending, he seized the disc and lifted it on edge. "You see? It is light!"

Craig brought up his own hand beneath it. For all its size, the thing seemed hardly heavier than balsa.

Gesturing him back, Bukal swung

the disc clear of the ground, holding it waist-high, plate-flat. "Now, I spin it . . ." He whipped it round as if its center were mounted on a pivot, pulling through with his right hand, guiding with the left.

The boat was almost to the island now. The guards were readying their weapons.

Faster, till the wave-flow catches . . . The disc was spinning like a top now, parallel with the ground.

Craig threw a quick glance at the guard-boat. A trickle of sweat rilled down his spine.

He looked back to Bukal and the saucer.

Suddenly, there was the slightest of jerks. The disc seemed to vibrate.

Bukal dropped his hands. For a moment the disc hung in the air, spinning free.

And then, incredibly, instead of falling, slowly it began to rise!

Open-mouthed, Craig stared, still not quite believing.

But already, Bukal, was moving. Nimbly, he threw himself forward, flat on the disc.

The plate stopped spinning. As if by magic, it hung suspended in the air, swaying gently.

Bukal clambered to his feet, balancing on the polished surface as a bather might upon a surfboard. Tilting skillfully, he sideslipped

the strange craft down a fraction lower. "Get on!"

Sucking in a breath, Craig slid aboard.

Bare yards away, the boat beached. Guards swarmed ashore, cursing and shouting.

Nonchalantly, Bukal threw them a salute, and brought the disc round in a lazy, climbing spiral.

Green fire, falling short. Fuming rage, wild curses.

"You see—?" The elation of triumph rang in Bukal's voice. "It's the end of the barons, Earthman! How can any barriers hold back the Baemae, when with discs like this we can sail above them? To the south, there's the whole djevoda range and freedom! Already, we've colonies of our own down there, free colonies, spread out so the barons can't strike at them. We're turning out these discs by hundreds—emptying the cities, stripping the estates to their last serfman—"

Frowning, narrow-eyed, Craig stared down at the panorama spread out below them, then off to the glittering towers of Torneulan.

"Why send for me, then?" he cut in on the other. "Who's Tumek? What made him call for help from the Federation?"

The discman's face sobered. "Why—?" He shrugged. "That I can't tell you; it's still Tumek's secret."

"And . . . who is he?"

"Tumek? Light came back to Bukal's bronzed face. "Call him genius: that says it."

"But—"

"A statue-caster by trade; old, now; one of the free Baemae craftsmen. These discs—he devised them. The colonies, too—they're part of his plan."

Yet he sent for help . . ." Craig's frown deepened.

"He heard rumors of some new scheme of Zenaor's." Bukal shifted, glanced up into the darkening sky. Tilting the disc, he crept it in towards the outskirts of the city's bleak Baemae quarter. "When the green day suns, Boh and Koh, set, and night comes, I'll drop you off near him. He's hiding in the shop of a friend, Notal, in the Street of Arts, waiting for you."

Craig nodded slowly. Thoughtfully, he looked away to the west, where the nose of the starship showed above the buildings like a slim silver lance-tip. "Good. Meantime . . ."

"Yes?"

"Meantime—"

**I**T was a sentence never finished. Suddenly, out of a gap in the roof of a ruined building below them, a blurred bulky mass vomited towards them. Spreading as it

hurtled upward, it stretched into loose-patterned cordage.

Bukal went rigid. "A net-gun—!" He sideslipped the disc. It careened low over the hovels.

But green flame speared up in their path—a great, roaring gout of it, ten times the size of the blast that might come from any hand weapon.

Bukal jerked back. The disc spun crazily.

Then they were falling, men and disc alike, clinging precariously. Barely in time, the craft leveled off a fraction, then tilted once more to spill both Craig and Bukal to the ground, a jarring, ten-foot fall.

Guardsmen lunged up from cover, converging upon them.

Craig lurched to his feet, trying to shake the haze from his eyes.

But Bukal was ahead of him—shoving him bodily back into an alley. "Run for it, you fool! I'll hold them—"

Staggering, half-falling. Craig fled into the shadows.

The starship. That was the answer. If he could only reach the starship! This thing was beyond any one man's handling . . .

Panting, he crawled up a crumbling stair, searching the skyline for some glimpse of the silver prow to guide him.

Then there it was, off to the west.

Craig's jaw tightened. That slim silver craft represented the strength of the whole Federation. One word from it, and a fleet would come roaring down upon Lysor.

But first, that word must be spoken.

He phrased the message in his mind: "DETAILS LACKING BUT NO DOUBT OF ZENAOR AGGRESSIVE INTENTIONS AS SHOWN IN ATTEMPTS TO KILL ENVOY . . ."

He started to turn, to make his way back down the stairs.

But in that instant the sky went suddenly bright with a blaze of light . . . a light so dazzling that it left Craig blind and shaking.

A light that centered on the starship.

Craig clapped his hands across his eyes. A wave of sudden panic gripped him.

Grimly—desperately, almost—he fought it down.

Slowly, his vision cleared. He felt his hands fall.

Then he wished he had not.

For now the starship's silver prow no longer stood silhouetted against the distant western sky. As if by magic, it had vanished, its passage marked only by a slowly settling dust-smoke haze.

So this was Zenaor's answer to the Baemae challenge. He had destroyed the Federation starship.

Craig Nesom stood on Lysor alone . . .

### CHAPTER III

THE Street of Arts. Narrow and winding, lined with the small, cramped shops of skilled craftsmen who wrought wondrous things of wood and leather, glass and metal. Here you could buy the finest filigree of silver . . . paintings on porcelain or plastic . . . figurines carved from djevoda tusks . . . fabrics that glistened with threads of Xumarian thril and Odak's orslan.

And here hid Tumek.

Tumek, the statue-caster. Tumek, the sculptor.

Tumek, genius of the Baemae . . . the man who had devised the flying disc and harnessed the power that surged through his world's magnetic waves.

Yet even Tumek had cringed before Zenaor's sadistic schemings and pleaded across a million drals of void for Federation aid.

Now, on Bukal's word, he lay in hiding here in the shop of his fellow caster Notal, waiting for the Federation's envoy to arrive.

At least, Craig Nesom hoped so.

Pausing in the shadows across from Notal's shop, he hesitated for a moment, studying the darkened front with its display of busts

that peered out, wan and ghost-like, in the blue night-sun Roh's dim light.

Somewhere at the back of the shop, a gleam of yellow flickered.

So there was really someone there. Trut-nerved, Craig started forward.

Only then, off to his right, metal clanged on metal.

Craig froze again.

More sounds crept to him . . . sounds of shuffling feet, of men in movement.

Silent as any spectre, he drew back against the building behind him . . . slid left along it till he was lost in the pitch-black angle where the next shop joined it.

The shuffling feet drew nearer. Craig caught the hiss of whispering voices. Shapes took form—the shapes of men stalking stealthily, skulking in the shadows.

Warily, Craig edged forward a fraction and peered along the front of the shop to his left.

But here, too, shapes were emerging from the murk. A stray blue beam glinted on what might have been a weapon.

Craig slid back into his angle.

The two groups met in mid-street, scant yards out from him. There was a buzz of whispered consultation. Then, silently, both groups drew back. The men spread out, ranging themselves along the wall on his side of the street.

Craig held his breath.

But already one figure was shuffling towards him, slouching against the wall bare inches from his shoulder. "A curse on the Baemae and their plots!" the intruder muttered. "Night's a time for wine and wenches, not for raiding."

Craig grunted wordless affirmation.

The stranger turned, peered at him. "Who are you, friend? Which company?" And then, in sudden shock: "You! You're not —"

With all his might, Craig slashed a stiff hand-edge across the other's windpipe, his Adam's apple. The man's voice cut off in mid-syllable.

Craig crashed the heel of his hand up under a stubbled chin, thanking the stars that his shoulder was no longer stiff. The intruder's head snapped back against the stonework. Hard.

Then his knees were buckling. He started to fall.

Craig caught him, held him erect.

In the same instant a whistle shrilled. The other shadow-skulkers leaped forward from their hiding places, converging on the shop across the street where Fumek had his refuge. They made no effort at concealment now. There were shouts; a splintering crash as the door burst in.

ICY sweat drenched Craig. Shaking, he eased his unconscious prisoner to the ground in the shadows of the angle and stripped him of the weapon in his belt—one of the pistol-things that blazed green fire.

Inside Notal's shop, another door went down. Craig glimpsed struggling figures silhouetted against a backdrop of yellow light.

All along the street, windows swung wide and doors opened. Lights flared. Voices rang out in a startled babble.

A man appeared in the entrance of the shop before which Craig stood, rubbing sleep from his eyes. "What—?"

In three quick steps Craig was beside him—jamming the fire-gun against his fat belly; shoving him back on his own tracks into the building; slamming and bolting the door behind them.

Fear flared in the fat man's button eyes. His blubbery face went slack.

"Quiet!" Craig stabbed the pistol against him harder. "One sound and I kill you!"

The other's mouth worked, but no words came. He tottered backward and slumped down onto a bench.

Craig opened the door a crack and shot a quick glance out.

The raiders were leaving Notal's shop now. They dragged a captive

with them, a short, balding man whose face showed the wrinkles of age.

Craig turned back to his own prisoner. "Who is that?"

The fat man's voice shook: "He is called . . . Tumek."

Tumek . . .

A chill shook Craig Nesom.

Across the street, the last of the raiders inside the shop paused by the display window. Deliberately, he picked up one bust after another and smashed it. The last he hurled through the window itself, then swaggered out to join the others. Their laughter echoed raucously.

Then someone barked a command. The laughter ceased. With chill efficiency a group fell in, formed a double rank facing Notal's shop.

Another command. Two of the guardsmen caught the prisoner by the arms and jerked him forward, slamming him back hard against one of the uprights of the shop-front. Then, quickly, they stepped aside.

Again, the harsh voice of command.

The double rank raised weapons.

Inside the shop across the street, Craig went rigid.

Out there, mere feet away, stood the man who'd brought him to this planet, the Baemae genius, Tumek.

Tumek, the one man who could tell him the things he so needed to know—the baron's plans; the dreams and schemes and power of Zenaor.

Only Tumek stood before a firing squad. Ten seconds more and he'd be dead.

Craig acted by instinct, then; not logic.

Quite coolly, he brought up the fire-gun he'd taken from the guardsman . . . leveled it with grim precision at the squad's commander.

The man passed some remark to Tumek. But the oldster only shook his head and stood the straighter, face calm, serene . . . almost spiritual.

Craig corrected his aim a fraction.

The firing squad's commander pivoted . . . sucked in air to give the final order.

Craig squeezed the fire-gun's trigger.

A green shaft of flame lanced out. It struck the squad chief square in the chest. He slammed backward — face contorted in a death's-head grimace; already toppling.

The squad seemed to freeze in its tracks. Then, as the spell broke, one man started to whirl, whipping round his own weapon.

Craig dropped him where he

stood.

Chaos descended on the guardsmen. Frantically, they lunged for cover.

**C**ROUCHED, shadow-silent, Craig slipped from the shop and moved through the murk towards the spot where the prisoner had stood, trusting to confusion and the dark to shield him. "Tumek . . ."

Someone roared, "Look out! It's the Earthman!"

The night turned dazzling green with fire-blasts.

Craig dived through the shop's shattered window, skidding across the floor on one shoulder.

A hand clutched his arm. A cracked voice choked, "Craig Nesom—!"

Craig twisted. Tumek's wrinkled face loomed, a dim blur in the gloom.

"Quick! This way—" The old man wormed towards the rear of the building.

Craig followed.

Only then a dark figure was rising and shouting. A fire-gun blazed, close at hand.

Craig shot back. The looming antagonist fell away.

Old Tumek fell with him.

Stumbling to his feet, Craig heaved up the oldster's limp body. With a strength born of sheer des-

peration, heedless of shouts and fire-blasts, he lunged on, out the rear door of the building.

A guard rose in their path.

Craig shot him down and charged blindly on, deep into the black alley shadows.

A thin whisper from Tumek: "Right . . . next crosspath . . . Door . . . unlocked . . ."

Craig veered. In seconds he was pushing past a heavy gate . . . easing it shut behind him once more.

The sounds of the guards' rage faded. Gently, Craig lowered Tumek to the ground.

An acrid scent rose in his nostrils . . . the scent of charred flesh. With a shock, he became aware of the old Baemae's hoarse, labored breathing.

Numbly, he ran cautious fingers over the other's withered body.

The flesh along Tumek's right rib-casing *crackled!*

Then, slowly, the old eyes opened. The cracked voice spoke, the faintest of whispers: "You . . . are the Earthman—the Federation agent?"

Mute sick, Craig nodded.

"Good." The eyes closed again, as if suddenly too heavy.

But only for a moment: "Earthman . . ."

"Yes."

"Ourobos . . . from Xumar—they are Zenaor's weapon."

"Ourobos—?" Craig strained close. "Tumek, what are they?"

"A . . . lifeform. Zenaor's daughter can tell you." The voice of the old Baemae grew weaker.

"Zenaor's daughter—!"

"Yes. Narla . . ."

"But—"

"Only . . . one weapon . . . against ourobos—crystal."

"Crystal—?"

"Ourobos . . ." The old man's face was slack now, his words thick and mumbled. It was as if he could no longer hear Craig's questions. "Other planets, too . . . not just Lysor. That's . . . why I asked help. Zenaor . . . dreams of conquest."

"Tumek—!" Craig choked. "Tumek, the crystal — tell me about that!"

But again, he could not know if the other even heard.

"Narla . . ." the old man whispered, "see Narla . . ." And then: "Disc . . . on roof . . . here . . ."

**T**HE words died in a rattle. Muscles tensed in a small convulsive movement . . . The mouth fell open. The old head sagged back.

Tumek died.

For a long, long moment, Craig Nesom slumped beside him.

It was no end for genius. Not



here, in a dirt-floored hovel off an alley.

Only that was death's way. It paid no heed to propriety or convenience.

Nor to right, either, nor the needs of men.

Without Tumek, the Baemae cause might go down to disaster. Lord Zenaor could yet live to fulfill his dream of conquest, carve his path across the universe with the ourobos.

Unless the crystal stopped him.

"The crystal"—that was all Tumek had said about it. Not what it was, nor how to use it.

But . . . there was still Narla.

Narla, of the cool grey eyes and flaxen hair. Narla, who laughed and tempted—and then went cold with sudden fury.

Narla, Lord Zenaor's own daughter.

Tumek had said to see her.

Slowly, Craig got up. Stiff, shuffling, weary, he made his way to the room's one slot-like window.

The night outside was brighter now, blue with Roh's chill rays. The Kukzubas towers loomed sleek and shining, sheer to the very sky.

And there was the Central Tower, also; the Tower of Zenaor—rising even higher and more starkly than the rest.

How could any man hope to get

into that grim crypt to talk to Narla? Every door would be locked, every entrance guarded.

At least, on the lower levels.

But higher, perhaps . . .

Thoughtfully, Craig appraised the towering structure.

Invading it would be madness, pure and simple.

And yet, with the starship shattered, what did he have to lose?

Besides, Zenaor owed him a debt . . . a debt that only blood could cancel.

Blood. The blood of the starship's crew, and of the Baemae. Of Tumek, and a grey-thatched serving-serf without a name.

And on the roof here, Tumek had said, a disc lay ready.

A disc, and a debt of blood, and the Tower of Zenaor.

And Narla.

Why was he hesitating?

Cold-eyed, tight-lipped. Craig Nesom groped towards the stair . . .

## CHAPTER IV

THE disc came down to the roof like a drifting feather. Stepping from it, Craig paused for a moment, staring out with brow furrowed at the spangled night of Torneulan. City of barons or city of Baemae, there was beauty here in this silent moment.

Only now was no time for beauty. Not here, atop Lord Zenaor's sleek, shining fortress tower.

Craig turned.

A stair-housing rose near one edge of the flat, parapeted roof. Crossing to it, he kicked out the door's translucent panel.

Inside, now. The stairwell yawned like a black, bottomless pit. Silently, Craig crept down the steps.

There was another locked door at the bottom—and this one had no panel.

Craig kicked it.

It held firm. He kicked it again — unrestrained, now — and again, and again, till the echoes rang round him in thunder-chorus

From beyond the portal came a beat of running feet. Someone fumbled with the door's handle.

Craig drew his fire-gun . . . waited . . .

The door opened, a bare inch.

Craig kicked it with all his might.

The door burst open. A guard reeled back, clutching his face where the swinging edge had struck him.

Craig kicked him, too—first in the belly; then, when he doubled over, in the face.

The guard crumpled; lay still.

Craig strode down the hall, try-

ing doors. But the rooms they sealed were empty, unfinished.

Craig went back to the guard.

The man was moaning now. His fingers dug spasmodically at the naked tiles of the floor.

Dragging him erect, Craig shoved him back flat against the wall.

Slowly, the other's sagging head lifted. The glazed eyes cleared a little.

Craig held his voice cold and level: "Where's Zenaor?"

"At . . . this hour?" The swollen lips bubbled. "Down—seventh level."

"And between?"

"The guest chambers — Lady Vydys—her party."

"Vydys . . ." Craig paused—frowning, searching his memory. Where had he heard that name before? From Tunek, or Narla? Or in a report, while he briefed for this mission?

He scowled, probing. "Why are you here, then, when this level's empty?"

"Why—? With Vydys in the tower?" The bloodshot eyes widened. "My lord Zenaor loves life. He knows better than to trust her."

The memories came back with a rush, if not their source. Vydys the Cruel, chief of all Zenaor's rivals! Here, in this tower, tonight!

Craig drew his lips thin.

"Where's your post, scum?"

"Below—force shaft." The guard gestured. "Heard you—kicking."

Craig stepped aside. "Get back to it, then." He motioned with the fire-gun.

The guard shot him a bleared, uncertain glance. Then, shuffling, not quite steady, one hand to the wall, the man moved ahead of Craig down the hall to an alcove backed with twin sliding panels. Clutching the grip of the one of the right, he pushed it back.

Beyond lay a small, square room like a closet, but without floor or ceiling.

The guard stepped across the threshold.

It was as if he had moved out onto an invisible platform. Erect, motionless, he sank slowly down the shaft.

Craig shot one breath-taking glance into the pit, and followed.

**I**NSTANTLY, a pulsing vibrance seemed to grip and hold him. Taut-nerved, he stood rigid, drifting slowly down against the lift of an upward flow of some strange current.

Below him, the guard reached out and caught a metal handhold jutting from the shaft's wall, then slid back a panel like the one above and stepped out into a

broad hall.

But where the top level had shown stark and bare here lay luxury to stagger man's imagination. The walls were a shimmering tapestry of translucent color. Craig's feet sank into raaltex carpeting so thick and soft that it was like stepping onto a cloud.

He gripped the guard's arm. "Now—Vydys!"

"This way." The other turned, shuffling ahead. "End chamber . . ."

Craig shifted the fire-gun in his hand; laid the butt hard across the guard's head behind the ear.

The other crumpled to the floor, unconscious. Stripping off the man's harness, Craig donned the livery himself and lashed his prisoner's wrists and ankles, rolling him out of sight behind a long, sofa-like seat.

Then he was at the door, the door to the Lady Vydys' chambers.

He paused for a moment, listening with his ear against the panel.

No sound came.

He gripped the handle . . . turned it slowly . . . let the weight of his shoulder press against the door.

Ever so slowly, it swung open a fraction. Craig peered into the living room beyond—a place fully as ornate as the corridor, with furnishings sleekly trimmed in polished chromite.

Craig slipped inside and closed the door behind him.

On the far side of the room, another door stood open. Noiselessly, Craig crossed to it . . . looked into a bedroom. A sleeping-couch, all gold and white, rested against the far wall, framed in darkly glinting mirrors.

While he watched, the coverlet moved. A body shifted.

Gripping the fire-gun, Craig walked warily to the couch-side.

Black hair rippled against white pillows. A sleek body twisted—sensuous, cat-like.

Then the head turned. For the first time, Craig saw the face.

A woman's face. The face of evil, incarnate, living in the fleshly form that men called Lady Vydys.

Yet she was lovely. Even here, even now, Craig Nesom's heart pounded as he looked down on her.

He rested his weight against a chair-arm; raised the fire-gun. "Vydys . . ."

She stirred in her sleep. The shadow of a frown crossed the lovely face.

"Vydys!"

Slowly, the soot-black lashes lifted. The dark eyes opened.

Craig said softly, "Quiet my lady! Don't make me kill you!"

She showed no sign of fear—no sudden tensing, no quick tremor.

"You know, of course, that your heart will be torn from your body for this, carrion." Her voice was low and silky.

"Will it?" Mirthlessly, Craig chuckled.

Vydys' black eyes widened. She twisted beneath the coverlet. "You are no guardsman!" And then—staring, rocked back with sudden shock: "You—the Earthman—!"

"Yes, the Earthman," Craig nodded bleakly.

"But—what do you want—?"

"You know a girl called Narla? Zenaor's daughter?"

The dark eyes narrowed. "Yes . . ."

"Would you trade me even for her?"

A note of bafflement; a shifting: "Trade you—even . . .?"

"Yes." Craig leaned forward. "I want her, Vydys—and I'll give you Zenaor's own head for her!"

Vydys' hand came up to the ripe swell of her bosom. Scarlet lips peeled back from small, sharp white teeth. "Zenaor's head—!"

Again, Craig nodded. He let his own lips part in a tight wolf-grin. "Let's talk straight, Vydys. You hate Zenaor for his power as chief of barons. You know that the first safe chance he gets he'll cut your lovely throat."

"And so—?"

"So your only chance is to get

him first—before he finishes the Baemae and decides to turn his full force on you.”

Of a sudden an irregularity developed in Vydys’ breathing. The dark eyes smouldered. “You . . . would help me with this, Earthman—?”

Wordless, Craig tilted his head in affirmation.

“Now—tonight—?”

“Yes.”

“But why? What is your reason?”

Craig smiled—a crooked smile. “I said I wanted Zenaor’s daughter Narla, Vydys. That means alive—both of us. I’ll need help to handle it.”

THE last traces of Vydys’ hesitation vanished. She twisted; sat up on the sleeping-couch, her face aglow with dark excitement.

“He is on the seventh level, Earthman. If anyone should question, tell him that you carry a message to Zenaor for me. Here, take this signet—” She stripped a ring set with a carved black gem from a slender finger; held it out to Craig.

Not touching it, he said, “I’ve got a better idea.”

Vydys’ smooth brow furrowed, ever so slightly. “What—?”

“You go with me.”

She caught her breath.

“You see?” Craig laughed harshly. “The picture changes when your neck’s in the noose along with mine.” He got up; gestured peremptorily with the fire-gun. “Come on!”

Her nostrils flared. “And if I will not?”

Craig paused; brought his weapon’s muzzle up, steady and level. “A blast from this at close range would sear your breasts till they crackled, my lady.”

A quick-drawn breath. Fear was in the dark eyes now—fear, and . . . something else, something strange, hard to define.

Then, wordless, the woman slid from the bed and pulled on shoes and a diaphanous outer garment.

Craig came close behind her. “Time’s short.”

She shrugged; leaned against him for a moment. “Why do you want her, Earthman—that pale slut, Narla?”

Involuntarily, Craig stiffened, then stood wooden-faced, unmoving. “Why does any man want a woman, my lady?”

“A woman—?” Vydys’ laugh held an edge of scorn . . . or was it fury? “You call that creature a woman, Earthman? There’s water in her veins, not blood!”

Craig stepped away from her, not answering.

For an instant lines of quick an-

ger slashed Vydys' face. Then the tempest faded. Together, the two of them, they went out through the corridor to the force shaft. Rode it down in pulsing silence to the seventh level. Walked echoing halls where the tension crawled like a living thing.

Ahead, an intersection loomed. Down the right-hand passage, a guard paced slowly.

Vydys breathed in sharply. "There—he watches over Zenaor's chambers!"

Craig pushed her forward.

The guard came about, his face a bleak mirror of suspicion. His hand hovered by his weapon.

Vydys said, "I seek the Lord Zenaor."

"At this hour?" Irritation pushed aside distrust. "My lord sleeps."

Ever so casually, Craig eased closer.

"Are you sure?" Vydys' hand came up in a helpless, perplexed gesture. "They told me—"

Craig turned and side-stepped, as if to hear them both the better.

The guard scowled. "Listen—"

Craig brought up a hand as if to scratch his head—and then, pivoting, smashed a blow to the guard's temple.

The man staggered, clawing for his weapon.

Craig caught his wrist in both hands; twisted.

It spun the other around—off balance, still staggering. A kick to the back of his knees buckled his legs. He sprawled flat on his face.

Then, before Craig could move, Vydys threw herself on their fallen foe like a tigress. A slender, stilleto-like knife flashed in her hand, lancing down into the soft hollow at the base of the guard's skull.

The man's body jerked once, spasmodically, then lay still.

VYDYS came to her feet in one smooth, sinuous motion. She was breathing hard. A strange, hot light of excitement gleamed in her eyes.

Craig snatched the bloody knife out of her hand. "Why did you do that? We could have tied him —"

"So that he could talk later?" Teeth bared, she laughed, high and keening. "No, Earthman! This way is better!"

Craig looked from the dead guard to the knife. He could feel the hair along the back of his neck rising.

As if reading his thoughts, Vydys laughed again—low, this time; taunting. "Did you think to find me defenseless, Earthman? Me, Vydys of Cadilek?" She swayed close against him. "You have daring, warrior! That is why I

came with you; not out of fear."

Craig pushed past her. "Come on, then—before Zenaor's men surprise us." Bending, he dragged the dead guard up by the harness.

Vydys' face was a mask, the dark eyes unfathomable. She turned and pulled back the door's handle.

The portal swung open. Wordless, Craig followed her into the room beyond, dragging the corpse with him.

A man's quarters, these—bleak, severe, without ostentation. Here no mirror walls threw back the glint of polished chromoid. The raaltex carpeting of the chambers above in this room was replaced with ostran tile and schalagat. Dark leathers gleamed dully against the flat contrast of iron-grey duroid.

Cat-like, slim Vydys tiptoed to the sleeping chamber's entry. Her breath hissed in the stillness as she looked in.

Taut-nerved, Craig lowered the dead guard to the floor.

But already Vydys was back beside him, slim hand outthrust. "My knife!" It was a command.

Craig stepped past her, not answering. In his turn, he peered through the arch into the other chamber.

Zenaor lay there, sleeping. Yet

even at rest, the lean, high-boned face showed no trace of slackness. The muscled hands still curled to fists.

"My knife!" Vydys whispered again, close to Craig's ear. "You promised me his head, Earthman!"

Craig stared down at her.

The dark eyes glowed like twin coals now, and the skin of her face seemed suddenly to have stretched tighter, replacing curves with planes and hollows. The fingers that strained towards the dagger trembled with a naked urgency, somehow obscene, as if in the blood-lust of this moment the woman's very soul were spread out to the viewer, dark and evil.

Craig turned away . . . looked again at the sleeping Zenaor.

"Curse you, Earthman—!" Vydys panted. She clawed for the knife.

For an instant their bodies strained together in silent struggle. Then, suddenly, Vydys ceased to writhe and twist. Her body pulsed against Craig's.

His heart pounded. He clutched the woman to him.

A voice said, "If you move, you die!"

Craig froze. Ever so slowly, he brought his head round.

Narla stood framed against a drape-shrouded door to his right. She gripped a fire-gun in her

hand.

She raised her voice before he could speak. "Father!"

Zenaor came awake with a twist, a jerk of covers. The coal-black eyes gleamed beneath the heavy brows. "So—visitors!" And then, to Narla: "My daughter . . ."

"It's nothing. They spoke too loudly. I heard them."

The fire-gun in her hand stayed very steady.

"You'll not regret it." Zenaor groped a weapon of his own from a stand by his sleeping-couch. His lips set in a thin, mirthless smile. "Welcome, Vydys. You come in strange company."

"He . . . forced me . . ."

"He forced you!" Mockery rang in Zenaor's harsh laughter. And then, the mirth dying: "Woman, you go back to your chambers. Under open guard, this time, with every man ordered to kill you if you so much as smile at him."

Vydys' lovely face flushed. "Zenaor, you dare not!"

"Because if I do you'll kill me?" Of a sudden Zenaor's voice echoed flat menace. "You'll try, you mean, you bitch—just as you tried here, tonight. And you'll fail again. Only perhaps by then I'll have less need to let you live for the sake of Kulzubas unity, and I can watch you writhe and die instead, as you should die now!"

There was silence, then—a taut, hate-surgling silence. Eyes smouldering, white to the lips, Vydys smoothed her gown, her hair.

ZENAOR turned to Craig Nesom. "You, Earthman—now you, too, shall join ranks with your fellows who died in the starship."

Craig shrugged. In this time, this place, words were wasted.

"But slowly," the chief of barons continued. "There are many things I would ask you — things best brought out under torture: how you got here, into my chambers; the plans of the Baemae; your relations with Vydys. So, you die—but by inches."

Craig shrugged again.

The baron's eyes narrowed. A spark that might have been grim mirth lighted behind them. "And . . . there is another thing you should know . . ." He spoke almost softly. "Your serf genius, Tumek, sought to defeat me. With this."

Left-handed, he reached into the stand beside the sleeping-couch once more, and brought out a flat, black case perhaps six inches across. His thumb touched a spring. The cover flew open.

A great crystal gleamed on black orlon.

In spite of himself, Craig Nesom went rigid.



"You see? It ends here!" Zenaor chuckled. "What it means, how the serfs were to use it against the weapon I plan to defeat them with, I do not know. But whatever its purpose, I have it, and its maker lies dead."

He snapped shut the case, dropped it back into the stand. Back, now, both of you, while I call the guards."

The pulse in Craig Nesom's temple pounded. Turning, he started past Narla towards the door.

Her grey eyes dodged his. She stepped aside, fire-gun lowered.

"Guards . . ." That was Zenaor, at the com-box.

Craig stopped breathing, stopped thinking. Like lightning striking, he leaped sidewise, pivoting—back, behind Narla.

Zenaor roared a curse.

But already, Craig was clawing the girl close against him, snatching her fire-gun, blazing a flare straight at the baron.

Zenaor dived over the sleeping-couch. The fireball seared into the wall.

Craig jammed the gun against Narla. "Zenaor! If I die, she burns with me!"

Time stood still. Silence echoed.

Again Craig lashed out: "Do you love her, Zenaor? Do you want her to burn?"

He could hear the rasp of the

other's quick-drawn breath. "Curse you, Earthman—!"

"And curse *you*, Zenaor!" New recklessness surged through Craig. "Curse you for all the blood you've shed; your arrogance, your lust for power, your cruelty!" And then: "Vydys! Bring me that crystal!"

Tension. The fire-gun's muzzle, leveling.

Wordless, the woman obeyed.

Craig gripped the jewel-case. "I'm leaving now, Zenaor—and Narla goes with me! Warn your guards of that!"

Silence again, broken only by the sound of heavy breathing.

Craig drew Narla back, tight against him, a living shield. Holding her close, he backed through the exit door. The girl was trembling now. He could feel her heart pound.

Then they were out in the corridor once more . . . the same bleak, echoing passageway through which he'd come with dark Vydys.

Only that seemed an eternity ago, now.

Jerking the door shut, dragging the girl by one wrist, Craig raced for the force shaft. Samming back the panel on the down-side, he jammed it ajar. Then, sliding open the other unit, he pulled Narla into the lift-current, closed the gate behind them, and let go of

the hand-hold.

Together, they surged upward, level after level.

Narla's face showed pale and drawn. "Where . . . are you taking me?"

Craig laughed aloud. His head swam, as if he were suddenly drunk on danger and recklessness and tension. "You'll see."

Overhead, the shaft-cap loomed closer . . . closer. They reached the top level, hung there, suspended.

Then Craig slid back the panel, and they stepped out into the bare, echoing hallway's darkness. Still gripping the girl's wrist, he groped his way up the stairway and out onto the flat top of the tower.

THE disc still lay where he had left it. Far to the west, the sky was already turning turquoise, Roh's blue beams dimming. In minutes the great green morning sun called Boh would climb above the far horizon.

Pulling Narla to the edge of the roof, Craig peered down.

Ant-like, men were moving through the street below—spreading out, forming a cordon.

"Too bad I'll have to miss the reception." He chuckled and turned back to Narla. "Now; about the crystal—"

"The crystal—?" Her grey eyes

clouded. "I know nothing of it."

Craig stared. "But Tumek said —"

"He sent it to me to hold for him. That was all. He never told me its use."

A numbness gripped Craig.

The girl said, "Besides, even if I did know, why should I trust you—you, who came as murderers come, with that creature Vydys to whom only pain is passion?"

Craig turned on her. "What —?"

"You held her, did you not? Else how could I surprise you—?"

"Are you jealous, then—because it was she I held, and not you?"

Narla's face turned white with fury. "Not even a sadat would say such a thing!" She jerked free of Craig's hand, beat her small fists on his chest. "Go, you rabble! Leave me! Go back to the scum, the Baemae!"

Craig reached for her hands.

She jumped back and slapped his face.

The sting of her palm was like a trigger. With a curse, he lunged for her and caught her to him, still struggling and flailing.

"Is this what you want?" Savagely, brutally, he kissed her.

Her lips were like ice. Her eyes blazed grey fire. "Is that quite all, Earthman?"

Craig sucked in air. "No. Not

quite." Pinioning her arms, once again he glanced down at the cordon of guards in the street below. "You see . . . you're going with me."

"No!"

"Yes." He flashed a tight, hard grin. "Without a knowledge of how to use Tumek's crystal, the Baemae will need a weapon against your father. And what better could they find than you, his daughter, as a hostage?"

Shoving her aside, he lifted the great disc from the rooftop; spun it.

It jerked . . . caught . . . hovered.

"Please, Craig Nesom . . ."

"Please indeed, my lady Narla! We're sailing south this morning—away from Torneulan, beyond the reach of your father and his cursed Kukzubas barons."

"You mean—?"

"Yes!" Bodily, he lifted her and set her on the hovering disc. "We are traveling south to the djevoda range, and freedom!"

## CHAPTER V

**B**ELOW them now stretched rolling grasslands, mile after green-gold mile. Afar, the darker green of shrubs and trees marked water-holes or fringed the meandering streams that glinted in the clear

white light of Yoh, Lysor's midday sun. A fragrance—of flowers, of foliage—drifted upward even to the disc, high above it all, still gliding southward.

A paradise, it was. But a paradise apparently without human population. Craig still could find no sign of habitation—only the tiny, moving dots that were herds of some unknown animal grazing.

Then, off to the west, a thin wisp of smoke curled skyward.

Craig shifted his weight so that the disc wheeled towards the distant streamer. "Narla . . ."

The girl's blonde head moved just a fraction—barely enough to tell him that she, too, saw the far-off feather. That was all. She didn't speak.

A little of Craig's elation left him. Again, as a thousand times before, he wondered about the slim girl crouching on the disc between his feet.

She was Zenaor's daughter.

Yet . . . she had also helped to bring him, Craig Nesom, into contact with the Baemae.

Whose side was she really on?

Or did she even know herself?

Craig wondered.

But whatever the answer, she was here with him, in his power—his weapon to break her father's grip on Lysor.

He should have been glad for it. It was what he'd sought, the

thing he needed to help avenge his friends who'd died aboard the starship. Only somehow, now, it brought no sense of surging triumph. If anything, the thing he felt was guilt, an ugly gnawing of his own conscience because he'd forced her to come with him.

Ahead, a huddle of buildings came into view below the smoke-wisp.

Craig changed course a fraction.

The buildings showed clearer now—shanties straggling out behind a palisade, across a broad, hill-sheltered plain that sloped down gently to a river. For the first time, Craig could see people moving about.

He tilted the disc, coasting down towards the village in a long, looping arc.

But now those below glimpsed the saucers. A flurry of excitement flared. Fingers pointed. Men ran towards the largest of the buildings.

But not for shelter. For suddenly they were back again, out in the open, carrying discs. In seconds a whole company had taken to the air.

Craig banked sharply as they raced towards him.

But a fierce cry rang out from above him. He jerked around just in time to see a host of other discs slashing down out of the blue.

Then one peeled off, lanced

closer. Craig glimpsed a lean, half-naked body . . . bared teeth . . . a fierce bronzed face.

The rider's arm snaked out. A long black whip flicked towards Craig. Before he could move, the lash twined about his upflung wrist.

The rider above twisted sharply. His disc sideslipped away from Craig.

The next instant the Earthman was flying through the air, jerked clear of his carrier by the whiplash.

Dinly, he heard Narla scream.

Then he was swinging free, like a plumb-bob on a string. Cold sweat drenched him. He clutched at the whiplash, clinging to it with both hands.

Now the disc from which he hung climbed in slow spirals, circling away from the village. Behind and below him Craig glimpsed Narla, similarly suspended, swinging pendulum-like below a second saucer.

The other discs drew in, grouping about the captives in loose formation. Still climbing, the whole flight topped the crest of the hills behind the village.

Here browsed a great herd of the animals Craig had seen grazing. Sweeping low over them, the discs wheeled towards a log stockade atop a knoll, hovered above it for a moment, and then settled slowly.

AT last Craig's feet touched ground inside the stockade. Shaking, he sank to the grass, fumbling to free his wrist from the whiplash.

It came free. Scrambling up, he stumbled to where Narla lay in a crumpled, sobbing heap, and tugged loose the lash that held her.

She clung to him, sobbing, her whole body shaking.

Overhead, the discs still hovered almost motionless, making no move to land.

Anger flared in Craig. Instead of releasing the whip, he surged up suddenly, jerking on it with all his might.

The disc from which Narla had been suspended tilted sharply. The whipman pitched off, arms flailing, and sprawled spread-eagled in the grass.

Craig dived onto him before he could even catch his breath—pinning him, gouging at his throat.

But already the other discs were plummeting. Sinewy, work-worn hands dragged Craig back.

Then a bronzed young giant who wore a high ceremonial helmet that must once have belonged to some baron's guard came striding forward. "Hold, friend!" He was laughing.

Craig stared. "Bukal!"

"No other." The strapping Baemae gripped Craig's hand.

"But—the guards—I thought

you dead."

"And so did I, for a while, there." Bukal chuckled. "But perhaps the gods have marked me to die in the pit with Vydys' rollers. For at the last moment somebody stumbled and I made it away through the alleys, found a new disc, and fled south, here, to my home village."

"So I see." Craig shook his head dazedly.

"As for you, just now, you were not recognized in time." The Baemae was suddenly apologetic. "You'll not begrudge it that we protect our village? After all, the barons have tried a hundred tricks to trap us—so now we bring all strangers here for scrutiny before we pass them on to full fellowship among us."

"Of course not." Craig matched the other's grin. "But is this"—he gestured to the log walls—"much of a prison?"

Bukal smiled grimly. Leading Craig to the nearest crevice, he pointed out between the logs. "The djevoda stand guard for us."

"The djevoda—?" Craig peered out.

They were strange creatures. Taller than two men they towered—heavy-bodied, six-legged, elephantine. Great tusks gleamed below broad, pig-like snouts.

"Watch!" Bukal commanded.

He drew an ornate dagger from

his belt-harness as he spoke. Catching the sun in its jewels, he flashed a beam into the eyes of one of the creatures.

It was as if it were a signal. A roar like that of a maddened bull burst from the djevoda's great throat. Tiger-fast, avalanchal, it lunged up the slope of the knoll, straight for the stockade. The logs rocked under the impact of its hurtling body. A great tusk tore through a crack, bare inches from Craig's arm.

The Earthman leaped back, cursing.

His bronzed friend laughed again. "A wonderful creature, the djevoda. Tons of solid meat, ready for the slicing. But definitely not to be domesticated."

"So I see," Craig agreed, a trifle sourly.

"They charge movement on sight," his guide went on. "Killing them, save from directly above, takes a deal of doing. So, they roam these southern plains by hundreds. That's why this range was never settled, till Tumek gave the flying disc to the Baemae. But overhead, we're safe from them. We can herd them with our whips like cattle, or kill them at will with a bolt at the base of the brain. They feed us, clothe us, protect us, give us freedom . . ." He broke off. "But I talk too much of our own affairs. Tell me, how did

you escape—and what of Tumek?"

Craig said, "Tumek . . . is dead."

The laughter left the bronzed man's face. "Tumek dead—!" He cursed aloud. "How did it happen?"

Briefly, Craig told him . . . showed him the crystal . . . mentioned the ouroboros.

Only one thing did he leave out. Narla.

He didn't know why. It made no sense, even to him.

Yet somehow, he could not bring himself to reveal her lineage . . . tell how she came to be here, put her forward in the role of hostage.

**B**UKAL was frowning when Craig finished. "There's too much here I don't understand," he grunted. "Ouroboros are not of Lysor, but of our sister-planet, Xumar — a loathesome, crawling horror beyond man's controlling. Innoculations with a rare oil will repel them, but no one has ever found a way to kill them. If Zen-aor were mad enough to bring them here, to Lysor . . ." He shuddered and left his sentence hanging.

"And the crystal—?" Craig displayed it.

Again, the other shook his head. "For all I know, it might as well be nothing but a lamp-lens." He straightened, thin-lipped. "But at

least we'll make our masters pay for Tumek! This very night!"

Pivoting as he spoke, he strode back towards the waiting discmen. "These two"—he gestured to Craig and Narla—"they are accepted. Take them to the village."

Only then did it dawn on Craig that the Baemae had asked not a question about the girl.

But there was little time for pondering on that. The men spun their discs; helped Earthman and girl to board them. The ground, the stockade, fell away.

Then the hills, too, lay behind, and they were gliding down beyond the palisade, into the village.

A withered crone led Craig and Narla to a hut. "Rest here, warrior—you and your woman. Tomorrow will be time enough to think of work and duty."

She left them, then, closing the door behind her as she departed.

Silence echoed through the room. Wordless, Craig turned to leave.

But Narla's voice stopped him: "Wait, Craig Nesom . . ."

He swung round. "What—?"

She said, "You didn't tell them that I was Zenaor's daughter. You let them believe I was your woman." A note of strain, of puzzlement, crept into her tone. "Why, Earthman? Why?"

Craig shrugged. "What point was there? Did it matter?"

"Yes, Craig." The grey eyes

were thoughtful now. "Yes, it matters very much. You brought me here to use as a weapon against my father—yet now you keep my secret. Why?"

Craig shrugged again, not speaking.

"Because Zenaor's daughter would have received a different welcome, Craig; so very different. You know that, surely."

He nodded slowly. "Yes, I knew it."

"Then why—?"

"Because there's been too much of blood and killing." He lashed out the words in sudden fury, out of all proportion. "I wouldn't turn in a dog to be tormented . . ."

The girl came to him, through the shadows, till she was close . . . so very close. "Then . . . it was not for anything that you felt towards me that you saved me?"

She swayed as she spoke—swayed forward, against him. He could feel the slow beat of her heart, the measured pressure of her breathing. The fragrance of her hair rose in his nostrils.

"No," he said. "No. There was nothing."

For a long, long moment she stood still, not moving. Then, very softly, she said, "You lie, Craig Nesom!"

Something inside Craig let go like a taut spring snapping. "Damn you—!" he choked, and crushed

her to him, hard against him.

She came willingly, body warm and vibrant; eyes closed, lips parted.

Red lips . . . softer than any dream of Vydys.

Craig drank deep of them.

Then, at last, the kiss was ended. They stood there, breathing hard, clinging to each other in the semi-darkness; and Narla said, "They spoke truly, Craig Nesom. I am—will always be—your woman."

He kissed her again, then, while a knot drew tight in his belly, and his throat swelled, and his eyes stung.

But all he could whisper was "Narla . . . Narla . . ."

Outside someone knocked on the door.

Craig stiffened; straightened. "What is it?"

"It's me Bukal. Roh's coming up. Would you raid with us?"

Craig looked at Narla.

Pain was in her eyes, but her voice stayed steady: "Your life's your own, voyager. And . . . I'll be waiting."

Craig called, "I'm coming, Bukal!"

They kissed again, and then he left her, striding out into the pale green light of the ebbing day.

OVER by the disc-shed, men were working—stacking the sau-

cers one upon the other till they formed neat cylinders, each half-a-dozen discs high.

Laughing, bronzed Bukal gestured to them. "You see, Craig? These are our weapons! Why should we kill, when we can hurt the cursed barons worse by sending their serfs through the skies to freedom?"

Craig nodded.

Another man came up. "We're ready, Bukal."

"Good!" The Baemae leader strode to the shed and caught up a disc. "Here, Craig. Lend a hand!"

Following his lead, Craig dragged a single saucer out into the open and spun it till it hovered on the wave-force.

"Now lash it fast atop a unit."

Moving the saucer to the nearest pile, Craig tied it down. A tilt—a shove—and all seven saucers took the air.

A man scrambled aboard each cylinder as it rose.

"North, now!" cried Bukal. "We'll see how the Lady Vydys likes running her estates without the Baemae!"

Vydys—!

Dark loveliness, rising from a dead guard's corpse with her knife still dripping blood.

Craig shuddered.

Only then they were rising, circling, and there was no time for



thoughts or shudders. High through the emerald sky they flashed while the hills fell away and the village vanished. Koh's green ball sank from sight beyond the horizon. Roh climbed afar, tinting Lysor's fields all blue and purple.

And still they raced north, the night wind whipping at hair and garments.

Then, far below, a black line scarred the grasslands. Craig caught a faint shout: "The barrier!"

Again, he was above the land of the Kukzubas barons.

Ahead, the stocky Bukal waved a sweeping signal. Discs slipped earthward.

Another signal. They dropped lower . . . lower . . . came at last to ground in the shadow of a grove of great sefopp trees.

Out of the murk, the dim figure of a burly man hurried towards them. "Thank the gods, you've come!"

Craig could see Bukal stiffen. "Why? Is there trouble?"

"Is there anything *but* trouble?" the other shot back, hoarse-voiced. "Someone betrayed your contact man to the Lady Vydys when she arrived back from Torneulan this morning. He died by her own hand in the torture chambers."

Bukal cursed. "Did he talk?"

"Would I be here if he had?" the burly man snarled back. He

scrubbed his palms on the front of his loose Baemae tabard. "The others are waiting for me to bring the word of your coming."

"Then get them!"

The burly man vanished into the shadows.

Bukal pivoted back to his helpers. "Hurry! Unlash the saucers!"

In seconds, the cargo of discs was spread out. Already, more men from the estate shuffled from the grove's blackness.

Then the burly man, too, returned. "All here," he grunted.

Bukal shot a quick glance around. "No women—?"

"No." The man shifted. "We thought you'd want fighters."

"Fighters—?" Bukal stiffened. "What do you mean? Why would we need fighters?"

The burly one fumbled. "Why . . . to meet Zenaor's raiding party . . ."

"*Raiders—!*"

"Yes. Had you no warning?"

The informer choked on his own spittle. "Vydys herself brought the word. Last night an alien from another system stole Zenaor's daughter and disced south with her. Now Zenaor swears—"

Bukal swung round, eyes blazing. "Earthman! Is this true?"

Numbly, Craig nodded.

"That girl! Zenaor's own daughter!" Bukal choked with fury. "You brought her to our village!

You gave no warning!"

Craig held his voice chill: "So? Could you ask for a better hostage?"

"No. Not if we had known. But now—" Bukal broke off and whirled round. "You"—this to the burly man—"take your people and head south to protect our village. The rest of us will run the barrier and try to intercept the raiders. As for you, alien"—he turned back to Craig, eyes hot and scornful — "you'll go south also. But as prisoner, not one of us."

Craig looked to the others; searched their faces.

Their eyes held no mercy.

"All right, you. Come on!" The burly man started towards Craig.

CRAIG whipped up his fire-gun and laid the barrel hard along the other's temple.

The man slumped to the ground.

Craig said tightly, "To hell with the lot of you! I'm no man's prisoner!"

"Curse you, alien!" Bukal took a quick step forward.

Craig leveled the fire-gun at the flat, bronzed belly.

Bukal halted.

Craig flicked the weapon's muzzle to the nearest of the Baemae. "You! Spin me a disc!"

Seconds stretched to eternity. Then the man's eyes fell. Wordless, he shuffled through the echo-

ing silence, tilted up a disc, and whipped it round.

The magnetic currents caught it; held it, hovering.

Craig vaulted aboard it. "Death's waiting for the man that follows . . ."

He threw his weight to one side, then back again. Rocking, the saucer swirled upward.

Again he tilted; sent it careening around the far end of the line of trees.

Behind him, Bukal shouted an order. There was a rush of feet, a flurry of movement.

Craig leaned far out, so that the disc almost doubled on its course, sliding back on the other side of the masking sefopp trees. Then, dropping it swiftly back to the ground, he leaped off and dragged it into the shadows.

Saucers sped past the end of the grove, riders and discs alike silhouetted dimly against the blue-black sky. Craig crept deeper into the undergrowth, flat on his belly.

More aching tension. More seconds dragging by, turning into minutes.

Then discs swept down again. Craig heard someone rasp, "He's gone, Bukal. We couldn't spot him." And then Bukal, cursing: "We can't wait any longer. Not with Zenaor prowling."

Again, discs tilted skyward. All

of them, this time.

Silence once more, broken only by the whisper of breeze and trees, the chirp of insects.

Craig crept back to his own saucer and wheeled it out into the open. Ten seconds later he, too, was climbing into Lysor's dark night sky.

Climbing—to what end, with every man's hand against him? Bukal or Zenaor, Baemae or barons, one and all sought his blood.

All but Narla.

Somehow, he had to reach her.

Grim, tight-lipped, he set a course southeast, veering just far enough north of the village so that he might pass Vydys' serfs undetected. Their very numbers might slow them. There was at least a bare chance that a lone man might reach Narla ahead of them.

Only then, as he sped on, he caught a sound.

He hesitated, straining his ears.

The noise came again—a muffled, rhythmic clanking.

Craig veered a fraction; raced towards the sound.

**B**ELOW Craig, dots appeared against the blue-grey shimmer of the grasslands . . . dots that crawled grimly, steadily southward.

He knew, then—knew what the dots meant, and the clanking. A chill ran through him.

These were heavy vehicles in

motion! This was Zenaor's column, grinding towards the village. They'd passed the barrier far ahead of Bukal.

And Vydys' serfs would never stand a chance against their power, their numbers.

That left it up to him.

Only what could one man do?

Cursing, Craig circled far ahead of the raiders—searching the rolling hills below, praying for some miracle of terrain, some inspiration.

But no miracle came. There were only the grasslands, the great straggling herds of the djevoda.

*The djevoda—!*

Craig came up short. Here was his miracle! Here his allies!

Sideslipping his disc in a flashing arc, he surveyed the ground beyond the column.

The vehicles were following the low ground, moving towards a pass of sorts in the hills that sprawled east and west across their path.

Craig raced south again. A long way south, till at last he passed above the distant range and swept down on its far side.

How long did he have? An hour? Or only half that?

A knot of djevoda moved restlessly as his disc's shadow fell across them.

Craig slashed back closer.

Rumbling their irritation, the huge, ungainly beasts turned west,

drifting towards the pass.

Craig searched out another, larger group and turned it, too. Then another. Another.

Across the hills, Zenaor's column was creeping closer. Sweat rilled down Craig's back. He crowded his growing herd of djevoda harder.

The beasts were angry now—bellying their rage through the stillness of the night; lunging at him, tusks high, when he swept too close.

If he should slip or fall—! He shuddered.

Then the first of the creatures began to funnel into the mouth of the pass. Craig raced his saucer back, moving up others to press in behind the leaders.

Now, again, the clanking of Zenaor's carriers drifted to Craig. He maneuvered his disc in a tight spiral—climbing, climbing.

The grasslands fell away below him. The range spread out like a problem in tactics set on a sand table: here were the djevoda, straggling into the pass. Beyond the hills, Zenaor's column twisted towards them, snake-like, as if hastening to join battle.

Already, the lead vehicles were swinging south into the rift.

Craig plummeted down ahead of the first djevoda.

Roaring, they fell back.

The Earthman raced away in a

monstrous circle—driving in the beasts, crowding them together in a milling herd that numbered hundreds.

The column was in the pass now, hurrying forward faster, as if its commanders realized the danger of such close quarters.

Craig rounded up the last straggling djevoda . . . hovered just above and beyond them, waiting.

**D**OWN the pass, lights gleamed. Drifting dust set Craig to coughing. The rumble and clanking echoed like distant thunder.

Craig dropped to one knee on his disc; brought out his fire-gun.

The approaching lights shone brighter. A beam sprayed across the first of the djevoda.

The creatures' great, tusked snout-heads lowered. Huge feet churned up choking clouds of dust.

Craig held his breath.

The lead carrier rocked over a bump. Metal clanged on metal. The lights flashed into the djevodas' eyes.

It was a signal. With a deafening roar, a djevoda lunged forward.

The carrier's brakes screamed.

But already the mountainous beast was thundering down upon it. Like an avalanche of flesh and bone, it crashed into the vehicle. Screams clashed with the shriek of rending metal.

Craig blazed with the fire-gun at the packed, elephantine mass of animated death below him.

Bellowing with rage and pain, the whole herd swept forward—on into the pass, following the already-charging leaders.

More carriers braked and crashed into each other.

Then the herd was upon them, smashing at them. Green fire seared through the night, mingling with the crashing thunder of some other, heavier weapon. Craig glimpsed a djevoda torn asunder in mid-stride, its six massive legs gone suddenly limp and sprawling.

But no human power could stop that hurtling, murderous tidal wave of flesh. Through the whole column the djevodas raged—crushing carriers, overturning them, stomping them to masses of shapeless metal.

At the far end of the pass, the last of the vehicles wheeled about in blind, desperate haste. Engines roaring, they raced for the safety of the open grasslands.

Only then, flashing shapes lanced down out of the skies to the north. Men dropped from discs onto carrier-tops, clamping their capes across the vision-slits.

Vehicles ground to a halt. Crews stumbled out, hands high in panic and surrender.

Craig surged to his feet; sent his own disc climbing.

Too late. For now saucers hung above him, too, hamming him in . . . saucers ridden by Bukal's lean, bronzed raiders.

And there was Bukal.

"Craig, friend—!" he shouted. "Hold, Craig Nesom!"

Craig stood rigid atop his disc.

But then the other was beside him, waving and laughing. "Can you forgive me, Craig? Without this blow you've struck, without the firing-sounds to guide us, we'd never have caught up with this column."

"And . . . Narla—?"

Bukal swept the whole sky with his gesture. "Go to her, Earthman! After this night's work I'd even give you Zenaor!"

He signaled as he spoke. The discs above Craig moved aside.

His throat all at once too tight to speak, Craig waved back and spiraled his own disc upward.

But as he did so, another saucer swept down—a saucer ridden by a woman he'd never seen before, a woman with an anguished, strain-strait face. "Alien!" Her voice broke ragged. "Where is Bukal?"

"Here, T'clar!" He glided up beside her. "What is it? Is there trouble?"

"The village—" Again her voice broke, and for a moment Craig thought she was going to faint. Then, rallying, she burst

out, "Bukal, the men from the estate of Lady Vydys—"

"Yes, T'clar—?"

"They were her guards, not of the Baemae."

A num' horror gripped Craig. He hardly heard the rush of words between them.

But . . . he had to know.

He blurted: "The woman who was with me—Narla—"

And then, the answer: "Alien, it was she they came for. Now they are gone again—and she is with them!"

## CHAPTER VI

**M**ORNING. Pale green morning, and the vast estate of dark Vydys the Cruel.

Bukal begged, "Give it up, Craig Nesom. There is no hope. Besides, this is between the Kukzubas, the barons. Vydys seized your Narla only as a weapon against Lord Zenaor. She will not harm her."

Craig cursed him.

The bronzed Baemae's lips drew thin. "What would you have us do, then, alien? Throw our discs against her defenses? Gut ourselves on her guards' weapons?"

Bleakly, Craig stared up at the shining ramparts. Bitterness seethed in him.

And yet . . . was it his right to be bitter? These were brave men,

dedicated to the Baemae's fight against the barons. But Narla was not of them. The things she meant to him lay between two only.

He said, "Forgive me, Bukal. You and your people—you have troubles enough. I could not give you more."

"Then what—?"

"I'll go alone."

The hot light left Bukal's eyes. He gripped the Earthman's arm. "No, Craig—"

"Yes, Bukal." Craig pulled free of the other's hand.

"But—"

Of a sudden Craig was weary of argument, of empty phrases. Tilting his disc, he raced away from the Baemae leader, skimming out as the swallow swoops, straight for the gates of Vydys' shaft-like Tower of Cadilek.

But green fire blazed from the port-slots. Veering sharply, Craig sped away again, climbing along the wall in the shelter of the angle bastion.

Then he had topped the lowest level's battlements. Leveling off, he glided across the roof to a point beyond the central obelisk where none could see him.

There, at last, he brought his disc to rest.

But no attack from above would baffle Vydys. Not after that night

of blood of Torneulan.

Ignoring the roof-ports, Craig crossed quickly to the parapet along the rear wall. A coil of rope, stripped from his waist, gave him a line down. In seconds he was upon the ground.

Fire-gun in hand, then, he moved along the wall to a deep-set, shrubbery-shrouded postern.

The door opened at his first pressure. A dim-lit, stone-walled corridor loomed, inviting.

An invitation to death, perhaps . . .

Cat-footed, Craig slipped inside . . . stood taut and breathless, waiting.

But no sound came, no sign of guards or trouble.

Craig's scalp prickled. This was too pat, too easy.

But trap or not, here lay his only chance at Vydys, his only hope of reaching Narla.

Shadow-silent, he moved down the hallway to twin kresh-wood doors, one set on each side of the passage.

Craig pressed each in turn. But they were locked; they would not budge.

Raw-nerved, he moved on again.

Now came a short stair, leading down. At the bottom, a heavy door barred the passage.

Walking softly, the Earthman descended. Reached for the door.

IT swung wide before he even touched it. Light blazed, so bright he fell back a step, half-blinded. A voice said, "Welcome, Craig Nesom!"

The voice of Vydys.

Craig pivoted.

But now, behind him, the kresh-wood doors had opened. Guards stood at the ready, weapons poised.

Craig faced the light again.

It shone like a dazzling wall. Even shielding his eyes, Craig could see nothing for its brilliance.

Vydys' voice commanded, "Come forward, alien! I would not harm you."

He sucked in a breath; stepped across the threshold.

Hands shot out . . . seized him . . . held him helpless while they wrenched away his fire-gun and his dagger.

Then, incredibly, Vydys was saying, "Away, guards! Leave us." And he was free again and stumbling forward, the door slamming shut behind him.

Groping, he drew himself erect; turned, searching for the woman.

But still there was only the blazing silver light, dazzling him to blindness. Her laughter rippled out of nowhere, a sound to sting him to important fury.

He lashed out: "How long do I stand here, woman? Do you fear

to face me?"

"Fear you—?" She laughed again, and now there was a new note in her voice, an element he could not name or place. "No, warrior, I do not fear you."

Even as she spoke, the dazzling light was fading. Like a wall dissolving, the veil of its brilliance fell away.

Vydys stood before Craig, high on a dais.

Blinking, he stared up at her.

The ripe lips curved into a smile. Sinuous cat-graceful, she moved towards him, sleek silvery body-sheath shimmering as she descended. "You see, Earthman? I told you I did not fear you."

He stared down into the midnight eyes, black and unfathomable as the void itself. "Then what—?"

The scarlet lips parted. She swayed against him. "Kiss me, alien!"

Involuntarily, Craig stiffened. "What—!"

The woman laughed softly. "Is it so strange a concept, alien? Am I so old, so drab, so ugly?"

Craig could find no words.

"We are as one in so many ways, Craig Nesom," dark Vydys went on. "Fear is not in us, nor yet mercy. We know what it means to strike with daring. Both of us hold ruthless to our hatred for Lord Zenaor."

Still Craig did not move. "And because we both hate Zenaor, I should kiss you?"

"If we stand together, we can defeat him." The dark eyes half mocked, half measured. "Some say that pain is my only passion. That is not true. I love also as a woman. There are men, Kukzubas barons, who would sell their souls for my embrace."

"Then why not give it?"

"Why—?" The throaty laughter rippled. "Because they desire me does not mean I want them, Earthling. I seek a man of blood and iron as well as passion—a champion to aid me against Zenaor."

In spite of himself, Craig smiled thinly. "Some might call that a tribute. To me, it seems left-handed."

Vydys frowned, ever so slightly. "I do not understand you, alien. Would it be such punishment to sit beside me, ruling Lysor?" And then, eager again: "For we can do it, with your valor and the weapon they say you received from the one called Tumek."

"The weapon—!"

"Yes. A crystal, to win power even over the Numarian ouroboros my spies say Zenaor plans to use against the Baemae. You have it, do you not?"

SHE drew closer as she spoke. Her hands slid over him,



touched the jewel-case where it lay flat against his body. Before he could stop her, she had it out and open.

"So—! This is the thing! A pretty bauble . . ."

Craig didn't answer.

"How do you use it, alien?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know!" The smooth face stiffened. "Or . . . is it that you won't tell me?"

Craig shrugged. "Have it as you want it."

For an instant the woman's nostrils flared. Then, once again, she was close to him—her breasts, her body, smooth and firm against him. "Please, Earthman! Do not make me believe that you are one of those who can love no woman!"

Craig held his silence.

A flush came to Vydys' dark, lovely face. She stepped back, eyes bright with anger. "Is it another, then—that blonde hag, Narla?"

Craig's fists clenched. His shoulders stiffened.

"It is, then! You'd scorn me for her!" Vydys' scarlet lips peeled back. "Very well! You shall have her—as soon as you give me the secret of the crystal!"

Sweat came to Craig Nesor's forehead. "I can't tell you what I don't know."

"You leave me little choice, then." Vydys was almost purring.

"I must have protection against Zenaor and his ouroboros. Unless you share the crystal's secret with me, I shall be forced to sell the wench back to her father for tan-agree oil to drive off the slime-monsters."

Dry-lipped, Craig said, "So be it."

"But I had such pleasant fantasies of how I would amuse myself with her in my torture chambers!" Vydys' eyes grew wide and doleful. "There are so many things that one can try! And a young, nubile girl may live for hours . . ."

Craig bit down hard to keep from shuddering.

"But since you will not help me —" Vydys sighed, turned, walked up the dais. "At least, your death shall entertain my favorites."

Craig would have lunged for her, then.

But she struck a great gong sharply. Instantly, the dazzling light-wall blazed forth to shield her. Guards leaped from row where to seize the Earthman. Their blows made his head ring.

"To the pit with him!" Vydys cried shrilly. "To the pit!"

Craig's world resolved into a nightmare of dank corridors and blows and blackness.

Then, suddenly, he was in the open once again, tottering on the rim of a deep, walled trench that ran about a side-shaft of the Vydys'

tower like a sort of moat.

"Look down, alien!"

Blur-eyed, Craig stared down into the pit.

Great tusks speared up at him. The bellow of an enraged djevoda rang in his ears.

Vydys said, "You and your Baemae friends are said to be clever with these creatures, alien. Especially with a whip." She turned to one of her retinue. "Give him the lash!"

The man brought out a long Baemae whip and handed it to Craig.

"Down with him!"

In seconds, Craig swung into the moat at the end of a rope-loop.

He was still staggering when the djevoda charged, thundering its rage.

Craig lashed out with the whip.

But without avail. The stinging lash brought a new roar of fury from the great creature. Savagely, it lunged again.

**B**ARELY in time, Craig leaped out of the way. Desperately, he ran through the trench in search of some exit, some chance for escape.

There was none.

Again the djevoda charged.

Once more Craig sidestepped in the nick of time.

Above him, on the pit's rim, Vydys laughed her silvery, sadis-

tic laugh.

Hate surged through the Earthman . . . hate mingled with fear.

Was he to die here—tusked high into the air; trampled under the great hammer-feet?

If at least the hell-bitch above only could die with him—!

He fell back to the moat's far edge . . . but not at the djevoda. No. Higher, this time. Higher—and straight at Vydys!

The long lash slashed through the air. Almost lazily, it seemed, it drifted. The snapper lifted . . . curled . . . wrapped round Vydys' slim waist.

She screamed, then.

Too late. Because now Craig was surging back on the whipstock with all his strength, a savage jerk.

The woman lurched forward, across the parapet. Down the steep face she slid, straight into the trench.

Along the rim, tumult erupted. Guards shouted. Serfs raced this way and that. Fire-guns blazed down at the djevoda. A ladder appeared, shoved down from above.

Dropping the whipstock, Craig lunged for the ladder.

A guard was scrambling down it. Catching him from behind, Craig knocked him sprawling. When another head appeared above the parapet, Craig butted low, not slowing.

Blood—blows—violence. A race

for the postern. As from afar, Craig caught the echo of Vydys' scream: "The alien! Stop him!"

So she still lived . . .

More guards. Veering, Craig darted through the nearest door and pounded through a maze of echoing corridors and stairways.

If only he could reach the roof, his saucer . . .

Locked doors. Dead-end hallways. Men racing towards him.

Craig sprinted towards a window.

Below lay the outer grounds.

Craig leaped.

As he did so, a familiar shadow swooped low—the shadow of a disc.

Bukal. He brought the disc down in a fast sideslip. "Quick—!"

Craig dived onto the saucer.

Then they were climbing—up, away from Vydys' Tower of Cadilek, away from guards and clenched fists and shouted imprecations.

Still panting, Craig said, "That was close, Bukal. Thanks."

Bukal didn't answer.

Craig craned round, peered up at him. "Bukal! What's the matter?"

The bronzed face stayed bleak and bitter. "It is the end, Earthman," he answered heavily. "The end of my people and their dream of freedom."

"The end—?" Staring, Craig fought down a numbness. "You

don't mean—?"

"Yes." Bukal's slash-mouth twisted. "Zenaor has carried out his threat. In a hundred spots south of the barrier, the ouroboas are unleashed against us!"

## CHAPTER VII

RESTLESSLY, the djevodas lumbered through the grasslands—a large herd, numbering over half a hundred.

A tension seemed to hang about the creatures. Great snout-heads lifted as if sniffing the morning breeze, then lowered again, swinging to and fro, watchful and surly.

"You see?" Bukal clipped. "They sense that today they are the hunted, not the hunters."

Frowning, Craig nodded.

"Come now. The nearest of the places we seek is farther south."

Craig tilted his disc, following Bukal as the Baemae leader skimmed his own saucer away, high above the ranges.

Below them, another herd appeared. Another.

Bukal shouted, "Observe, Craig Nesom! They move north—all of them!"

The Earthmen stared. Bukal's words were true. The scene below was like some vast migration—a sudden shift that turned the behemoths ever northward towards the barrier that separated this free

land from the tyranny of the Kuzubas barons.

Too, these new herds were moving faster, hardly pausing to tusk up the rich roots on which the monsters fed.

They crossed a river. Bukal drifted his disc in close to Craig's. "Watch, now. From here on we may find ourbos."

Even as he spoke, a wild scream of rage, of terror, rose from a distant group of the djevoda.

"Quick—!" Bukal raced ahead.

Craig followed, sweeping low behind him.

Then they were above the monstrous sextupeds—hovering, peering. Craig glimpsed grey movement amidst the green-gold grass-clumps . . . a shimmering as of slime that crawled and eddied. He started to glide lower.

"No—!" Bukal cried. "Stop, Craig! Don't chance it!"

There could be no mistaking the urgency of his tone. Discing higher, Craig studied the ground below in careful detail.

Now it dawned on him that more than one grey splotch showed. Here lay another; there, two more. Like water, they seemed to seep across the land in slithering tendrils.

The djevodas were bunching now, crowding together. Their great feet hammered at the earth. They tusked up clods in sudden

furies.

Bukal hung close. "You see? They are surrounded." His voice was bitter.

It was true. Everywhere, grey patches hemmed in the djevoda. While Craig watched, they linked and joined, eddying together . . . grew larger, larger, till they lay on the range like a sodden, ever-spreading blanket.

The djevodas stomped and pawed. Rage echoed in their roaring bellows . . . rage, and something more, something close akin to panic.

The grey took on new thickness. As if feeding on the very air itself, it piled in glistening layers.

THEN, rippling in Boh's green glow, a tendril crept from the mass, slithering through the grass towards the djevodas.

Slowly . . . slowly . . .

It touched a great foot . . . curled about the ankle.

Still unaware, the djevoda started to turn.

The slime swirled about the foot—clinging, holding.

The djevoda's bellow went shrill with terror. Aware of the danger now, it lunged savagely.

The foot tore free.

But now panic was upon the giant sextuped. Roaring, it charged across the clear space, straight into the mass of circling grey.

Its fellows followed.

Like a hideous grey wave, the slime swept in upon them—miring them, surging high onto their lumbering bodies.

The djevodas screamed and slashed and struggled.

But it was as if they were wallowing in quicksand. Each lunge, each tusk-slash, only brought the grey tide rolling higher. Splattering, each grey patch grew as it touched its quarry. In bare seconds the wave-thing engulfed the struggling giants.

The last scream died, swallowed up in the grey death of the ouroboros. Folds of slime rippled over final, paroxysmal spasms.

Shuddering, Craig whipped his disc into a tight, climbing spiral. The breeze was suddenly chill upon him, and he retched till his quivering stomach emptied.

Grim-faced, Bukal hovered beside him. "A pretty picture, is it not?"

Craig couldn't answer.

"So it goes everywhere across the grasslands. Like a tide, the ouroboros sweep over the south, pausing and gathering only long enough to kill, then spreading out once more in ever-greater numbers . . . " His voice trailed off.

"But—is there nothing—?"

"—Nothing that will stop them? No." Bukal's jaw jutted, hard and angry. "No, Craig. Nothing.

Our people learned that long ago, on Xumar, the ouroboros' home planet. Tanagree oil injections will render man distasteful to them; otherwise even the barons' military stations there would have had to be abandoned."

"Then—the oil—"

"They do not like it; that is all. It doesn't harm them."

"Oh."

"Already, our villages are emptying. By tomorrow the whole of the free Baemae will be crowded close along the border. The day after—who knows?"

Craig frowned. "Tumek thought he had an answer."

Bukal's face didn't change. "Tumek lies in his grave, and Vydys holds his crystal." His bitterness ate like acid.

Craig had no words. Silently, he stared away, off across the rolling southern grasslands.

Was there no solution anywhere to this monstrous scheme of Zen-aor's? Would other planets go down before it like the Baemae? And his own life . . . must he resign himself to defeat and death? Was that to be his destiny, the end of his assignment here on Lysor?

Bleakly, he wondered.

Then, afar off, a moving speck appeared, racing through the sky. Craig stiffened. "Bukal . . . "

The Baemae shaded his eyes.

"A disc," he clipped, tight-lipped. "More trouble . . ."

Together, Lysorian and Earthman lanced towards the approaching saucer.

Then it was close at hand, and Craig could hardly believe his eyes. For a woman rode it—a slim, young girl with golden hair that rippled and shimmered in the sunlight.

"Narla--!" he choked. "Narla!"

She swept close, then, and they grounded their discs on a knoll and she was in his arms again, laughing and crying at once.

**P**USHING her back at last, Craig held her at arm's length, feasting his eyes upon her. For today she was a different Narla. Her heavy Kukzubas cape was gone, replaced by the scanty scarlet halter and paneled belt of the free Baemae. A fire-gun hung at her hip, a jeweled ceremonial dagger across her thigh, and she carried one of the long black whips with which Bukal's men herded the djevoda.

Laughing, she pirouetted. "You see, Craig? This time I come as one of you, not Zenaor's kidnapped daughter."

Craig nodded. "Yes, I see. But—what of your father? How did you get here?"

A shadow crossed the lovely

face. But the girl's grey eyes stayed clear, her voice steady. "Once, Craig Nesom, I told you that I was—would ever be—your woman. That is what brought me here; that only. My father took me from Vydys, yes, trading tan-agree oil for my life. But he could not hold me. Not when you stood here, fighting with the Baemae. I fled from the Central Tower to an old friend among the Baemae. She gave me this garb and saucer, and told me where to find you. So, now"—she shrugged smooth shoulders—"I am here, to stand beside you."

Wordless, unable to speak, Craig again embraced her.

Only then Bukal was talking, breaking in upon them. "The our-obos come closer," he clipped. "There's no time to waste. My people need me."

Spinning their discs, the three took to the air and ranged north till they reached the river and the village.

The village. Tension crawled through it now, lined on every face, reflected in every movement. Men, women, children—they crowded round as the trio stepped from their discs.

Bukal searched the frightened faces. "What is it?"

"New nests of our-obos!" a man burst out; and another croaked,

"Already, the djevodas are in flight. By tonight—"

He broke off. There was no need to say more.

"Then . . . we have no choice," Bukal shrugged, bronzed shoulders heavy. "We must join the others along the barrier."

"Must we?" This from a woman. "Must we, Bukal—when we hold Zenaor's daughter as our prisoner?"

Taut silence echoed, sudden as summer thunder.

Frowning, Bukal looked down at the speaker. "What nonsense—?" he began.

But a man shoved forward and cut in upon him: "No nonsense, Bukal!" he flashed fiercely. "All morning, the amplifiers have been blaring across the barrier. Zenaor says he'll leave us free, safe from the ourobos, in trade for this wench and her alien lover!"

More echoing silence. More vibrant tension.

Then Bukal snapped, "Enough of this drivel! Zenaor's daughter or not, this girl's cast her lot with us. As for Craig Nesom—"

From one side, a rawboned, ape-like discman smashed a blow to the back of Bukal's head. The leader spilled to the ground.

Like wolves, the crowd surged forward.

Craig drove a fist into the face

of the man who'd struck Bukal; lashed a kick to the groin of another, beside him.

Then green fire blazed, a blast that seared between him and the Baemae.

The crowd stopped short; fell back.

Fire-gun in hand, bronzed body glistening, Bukal lurched to his feet. Blood dripped from his earlobe. "You scum, would you buy your lives with treason?"

No one moved. No one spoke. "Craig . . .".

The Earthman shifted to his friend's side in one quick movement. "Yes, Bukal."

The Baemae chief's eyes stayed on the crowd, his finger tight on the fire-gun's trigger. Face a bleak, expressionless mask, he said, "I see that I can no longer control my people. But at least you need not suffer for it. Take Narla and go!"

Wordless, Craig nodded. The girl beside him, he backed to the nearest discs.

THE Baemae fell back before him. He could feel their eyes on his back as he spun the saucers. Their hate surged over him like the magnetic waves on which the discs lifted.

Into the air again, rising . . . passing over palisades and circling

hills, racing away northwest towards the barons' barrier.

Where could they go? What would they do?

Bleakly, Craig mulled dark thoughts. He was glad that she kept her own council, till he saw her brush at her eyes and knew she was crying.

Yet what soace could anyone offer her in this nightmare?

Now other villages passed below them. Grey folds ringed one, glistening in Yoh's white light as they closed in upon it.

Craig closed his ears to the screams of the doomed and sent his disc hurtling faster.

Then the black line of the barrier loomed ahead. The blare of amplifiers rose faintly.

Craig turned. "Hover here awhile, while I reconnoiter."

Mutely, Narla nodded. He sped away.

More villages, more djevoda, more grey patches. The amplifiers, bellowing: "Bring in my daughter, Baemae! Bring in my daughter and the alien!"

No refuge.

Craig circled back.

Only now, two discs swayed where one had hung before. And one was sweeping down on the other.

On Narla.

Craig whipped his own saucer

higher, and then higher.

A man in high-fronted metal helmet rode the second disc, the one that was gliding down towards the girl. While Craig watched, he swung out his long black djevoda whip . . . tilted his disc till it plummeted like a speeding arrow.

Craig raced towards them.

Now Narla, too, saw the stranger. She tried to tilt her saucer.

But the man in the helmet pancaked his disc down, level . . . swung the whip. The lash curled round Narla's wrist.

She jerked back in a panic. Tottered.

Then her disc tilted and she was sliding—falling—

Craig careened his own carrier down.

The stranger's head came round. He clawed for the fire-gun in his belt-holster.

Craig shifted sharply. His disc's edge dropped. Before Narla's attacker could twist or duck, the edge hit him.

He bounced backward, out into empty air, flailing wildly. The handle of his whip sang by Craig's head.

With a desperate lunge, the Earthman caught it . . . clung to it while Narla swung in a wide arc beneath him.

The stranger's scream died in



the thud of his body striking.

Sweat-drenched, gasping, Craig maneuvered his own disc down till Narla's feet were on the ground once more. Another moment, and he was stumbling to her, hugging her shaking body to his. "My darling . . . my darling . . ."

How long did they stand so? An hour? A minute?

Only then, at last, they were no longer shaking. Once more, Craig could taste her lips and smell her fragrance and feel the softness of her hair as it rippled like ripe rangeland grasses.

But with that consciousness came other things—a far-off scream . . . a panic-strait knot of djevoda, fleeing . . . the faint, rank distant scent of the ourobos.

Away, beyond the barrier, the amplifier bellowed, "Give up my daughter, Baemae! Give up my daughter and the alien!"

NARLA'S cheek was soft against Craig's . . . softer than any satin. He kissed her eyes . . . tasted the salt of the tears that welled from them.

His Narla, crying.

Again the amplifier roared its message: "Give up my daughter, Baemae! That is the price of life! Give up my daughter and the alien!"

Bleakly, Craig turned and look-

ed back across the grasslands.

No longer were they a serfman's refuge. Not now. Not with the ourobos' slime upon them

A flurry of movement caught his eye. Faintly, he heard djevoda bellow panic.

The panic that came with the ourobos. The same kind that turned free Baemae into wolves, hunting down his Narla.

"If you do not give them up, I'll know my daughter's dead and you will die with her!" the amplifier shrieked. "Give her up, Baemae! Give her up and live! Why should you care what happens to the alien, Nesom?"

Why indeed?

Tight-lipped, Craig pivoted.

His thoughts must have shown on his face, or in his eyes. Narla clung to him—grey eyes tear-filled, lips aquiver. "No, Craig! No!"

He held her to him for a moment.

Hoarse shouts. Djevoda screaming. Rippling eddies, grey and obscene, amid the green-gold of the grasslands.

"Give them up, Baemae! Give them up or die!"

Craig said, "It doesn't matter, Narla. Not really. I've fought and I've lost, and a man has to play the cards fate deals him. But there's no reason for the others, the Baemae, to die with me. Not

if there's even the slimmest chance for them to live if I surrender. As for you, your father wants you back, that's all. He'll never harm you."

She was still sobbing as he lifted her onto the saucer . . .

## CHAPTER VIII

THE Central Tower of Torneulan, the Tower of Zenaor. Hard-faced guards. Echoing passageways. The bleak metal and leather of Zenaor's private chambers.

And Zenaor.

The Lord Zenaor, high chief of all Kukzubas barons.

The lean face was set in cruel lines now, the jet eyes narrowed to black diamonds beneath their heavy brows.

"So, alien . . ." His voice rasped, thick with menace. "At last you come to me, begging for mercy—"

"Mercy? From you?" Craig Nesom shrugged in spite of the guards' restraining hands, the shackles. "No, Zenaor. I beg nothing of you, neither life nor lenience. The things I've done I'd do again. I've given up only to stop this senseless slaughter."

"An altruistic gesture, alien," Zenaor chuckled. "But a trifle late."

He rose as he spoke and stepped to a paneled wall behind his seat. A carved section slid back at his touch, revealing a bleak, compact laboratory chamber.

A transparent, closet-sized cubicle stood on a stand in the compartment's center . . . a cubicle whose every inch and crack and crevice seethed and eddied with the swirling grey slime of ourobos.

In spite of himself, Craig Nesom stiffened; caught the whisper of Narla's quick-drawn breath.

Zenaor pivoted, still chuckling. "You see, alien? Here we have ourobos!"

Craig nodded slowly.

"And what is the ourobos?" Zenaor was gloating now, caught up in the excitement of his own revelation. "It is what your science would term a thallophyte, Earthman—a semi-intelligent thallophyte, a sort of deadly, highly-mobile fungus for which no specific has been discovered!"

"A fungus—!"

"Yes, alien! That's why no weapon prevails against it! Blast it, even with fire, and still asexual spores fly out, each to form the nucleus for another of its kind, a new ourobos!"

Craig's lips were dry. His voice shook. "Then — this planet, Lysor—"

"Lysor is doomed, you mean?" Triumph rang in the chief barons'

voice. "Indeed it is, alien! Now that I've brought the ouroboros from Xumar, nothing can stop them! Your sacrifice is wasted! There's barely enough tanagree oil to treat a handful of our barons!"

Craig choked. "No, Zenaor! Not even you could doom a whole race—"

But Zenaor still was speaking: "This is my answer to the free Baemae, Earthman! They wanted Lysor—they shall have it! As for the rest of us—my friends among the Kukzubas, a few loyal serfmen—I have ships already ramped to take us off to Odak, third planet of our system."

Craig stood numb, unable to move or speak.

So now, at last, he knew the truth—the secret behind Zenaor's dark dream of conquest.

Only now was too late. Now was a nonexistent second between the moment of the chief of barons' flight and the time when he'd lay down his challenge to a hundred, a thousand, other planets, backed by the horrid, devastating threat of the ouroboros.

And Narla—

**S**LOWLY, desolately, Craig turned to look at her . . . to see again the helpless anguish stamped on her lovely, horror-blانched face.

"Now you look to my daughter for solace, Earthman?" Again,

it was Zenaor speaking. "You seek to drown the bitterness of death and failure in the knowledge that she, at least, will live because you came in and surrendered?"

New tendrils fluttered in Craig Nesom's belly. He swung back; stared at his lean, merciless captor.

"Shall I tell you more, alien—another thing you did not know?" The chief of barons bared his teeth in a grin that belonged on a bleaching skull. He leaned forward, voice dropping lower: "Though I raised her as such, Narla is not my daughter!"

The very walls rang with shock. Even the cold-eyed guards went rigid.

Zenaor said: "Her father was of the Baemae, alien—and I lusted after the Baemae wife who bore his daughter, Narla. So I slew him, and took wife and child alike into my harem."

"Father—Zenaor . . ." Narla's poise was cracking.

Ruthlessly, the other pressed on: "She is not of my blood, alien. No ties coerce me to forgive her treason. So she dies here with you—with you, and all my enemies, Baemae or baron!"

A madness seized Craig Nesom. Savagely, he hurled himself at his tormentor.

But the guards were too quick, too strong. Brutally, they jerked

him back.

He writhed helpless, raging.

Only then a voice—a woman's voice, low and gentle as the hiss of the asp is gentle: "Your enemies, Zenaor—like me, perhaps?"

Craig went rigid. The guards, too; Zenaor; Narla.

A hanging moved aside. Dark Vydys the Cruel stood framed in a doorway—fire-gun in hand, liveried warriors behind her.

"Vydys—!" Zenaor's color was draining.

The woman laughed softly. "Surely, my lord, my coming does not surprise you? By way of a test, I injected some of the fluid you gave me into a serfman, then sent him out to meet the ouroboros. But they swallowed him up as they would any other, so I came here to discuss it." Airily, she gestured. "Of course, there was some small difficulty with your men at the gates. My troops had to slay them—"

Zenaor sucked in air.

Vydys said, "Your plans for the spaceships—they please me. The fleet shall blast for Odak according to schedule." A pause. A cat's smile. "Of course, you'll not be with it. It's better that you stay here with the Baemae."

"Vydys, in the name of our ancestors—our common blood as Kukzubas—"

"I remember it, Zenaor. You

shall not stand unprotected." Vydys brought a flat object from beneath her waist-cape, tossed it onto a table. "Here. I leave you this weapon."

It was the jewel-box that held Tumek's crystal.

Zenaor's fists clenched. "Curse you, Vydys—!"

She turned away as if he had not spoken. Smiling at Craig, she purred, "A last chance for you, Earthling. Would you join me?"

Craig's eyes met Narla's. Then, quietly, he said, "You know my answer, Vydys."

Her face contorted. "Die, then, you fool!"

She started to turn back to Zenaor.

Only then, incredibly, a fire-gun was in his hand, too, whipping up from beneath his scarlet cloak.

They fired together.

Vydys screamed in the same instant. For the fraction of a second green flame seemed to envelope her. A great black char-scar spread across her naked belly.

She tottered. Her guards lunged forward.

But already Zenaor was leaping into the laboratory chamber. Head-long, he dived for the transparent cubicle in the center and wrenched its hatch open.

LIKE a wave of slime, the ouroboros belched forth, spilling

across the floor in a hideous, withering blot.

The foremost of Vydys' charging guards screamed and tried to stop.

Too late. He pitched into the fungous tide; screamed just once more.

A bubbling scream . . .

The room erupted into chaos. Alike, Vydys' men and Zenaor's fled in shrieking panic.

Craig thrust a foot across one's path; snatched a fire-gun as the man fell sprawling.

The room was empty, then . . . empty save for dead Vydys and her guard, and Zenaor, and Narla, and Craig Nesom.

And the ourobos.

Coolly, Zenaor stood his ground beside the cubicle. Ourobos swept in close about his feet, then eddied back. They would not touch him.

He laughed; gestured. "You see, alien? The tanagree oil is in my veins; they will not touch me. But you . . ." He laughed again.

Craig said, "Much good may it do you Zenaor. A corpse is a corpse, even if the worms won't eat it."

He raised the fire-gun.

Zenaor's laughter died. He half-turned. "Wait, Earthman—"

He whipped up his own weapon. Craig fired.

Zenaor died.

Then Narla was in the Earth-

man's arms again, heedless of the ourobos' creeping tendrils. "So we die, Craig Nesom. But at least we die together."

Craig held her close. "No, Narla."

"No—?" He could feel her body stiffen. "But—what—?"

"I said no, Narla. We don't die. Neither of us."

She stared at him.

He said, "Don't you see? The ourobos — they're thallophytes. That's the answer." And then, when she still showed no comprehension: "Tumek knew. That's why he said his crystal was the only weapon that would stop them. And Bukal hit it right—by accident—when he looked at the thing and said it might as well be a lamp-lens."

"Craig, I don't understand—"

"I'll show you." Pushing the girl back, Craig took the jewel-case from the table where Vydys had tossed it and crossed to the nearest lamp . . . carefully replaced the focus prism with the crystal.

The beam sprayed out, all green and purple.

Tilting the lamp, Craig brought it to bear on the encraching slime of the ourobos.

Before his and Narla's very eyes, the creatures shriveled. The grey wave drew back.

Craig clipped, "This crystal concentrates some ray that's deadly to

the ourobos, just as on my world quartz glass lets ultraviolet pass. That was Tumek's secret. Somehow, he discovered Zenaor's plans and then worked out this answer.

Now, Baemae craftsmen can duplicate the formula and produce crystals by the thousands. It means the end of the ourobos."

He moved the light. More grey slime dried to sticky viscous blackness.

Then, arm in arm, together, he and Narla walked out into Yoh's bright noonday light, shining down on the free-world-to-be of Lysor.

*The End*

## INTRODUCING the AUTHOR



*Sherwood Springer*



*(Continued from Page 2)*

would have apoplexy.

My title was "A Glimpse Into the Future," and I still remember how it opened: "*The five thousand years slipped by like a dream. There was a moment of floating motionless in a black void, silent as the tomb. Then . . .*"

That principal deserved a lot of credit. He could adjust to defeat. He read the script in full and then drummed on his desk with a pencil for five minutes while I looked at the ceiling. Finally, in a voice oddly constrained, he suggested some minor revisions and shooed me out of his office.

After the oration had been delivered the following night, half the townsfolk who heard it wagged their heads and opined that Spring-

er boy would never amount to a damn. The other half wagged their heads back and said no, that's just about what he *would* amount to.

And now, almost a quarter century later, I sometimes wonder if perhaps both weren't right.

Newspapering got me in the years that followed. From school reporter to printer's devil to assistant editor on the Millheim (Pa.) Journal, linotype operator on the Springfield (Mass.) Union, copy reader on the Springfield Republican, advertising salesman on the Clarksburg (W. Va.) Exponent-Telegram and the Beaumont (Tex.) Enterprise-Journal, composing room foreman on the Alhambra (Calif.) Post-Advocate, ad opera-

tor on the Hollywood Citizen-News. There were other papers, other jobs, some in circulation and promotion, some proofreading, reporting, cartooning and columning.

In 1950, with a nod from Arthur J. Cox and A. E. van Vogt, I met Forry Ackerman. The science fiction field was booming and new writers seemed to be breaking in every day, so I opened up the old typewriter again. My first two stories missed fire. Forry sold the third one to your host, IMAGINATION; my next story was anthol-

ogized, and since then I've had no cause for complaint.

As of right now I must force myself not to think about new story ideas. If I let myself drift for five minutes I have to jot down another one, and my Plot & Idea File is already crammed with more material than I'll be able to develop in the next five years. The principal problem at the moment is finding sufficient time to devote to said developing.

—Sherwood Springer



"Ask him if he's got any with almonds."

# Rocket To Freedom

*By*

*John Christopher*

**Earth had been devastated in a final war leaving a few pitiful survivors. The plan was — build civilization again. The question — where?**

CORTWRIGHT, walking along the top of the stockade, had to strain his eyes in the intermittant moonlight for signs of movement outside the wall. He was glad when he heard Samoka, his relief, making his way towards him. Samoka shuddered.

"Cold."

"Brisk. You'll warm up when you've walked around a bit."

Samoka took the portable hooter from Cortwright and checked it on Low. Its harsh voice boomed out gently, and he cut it off again.

"Anything doing?" he asked.

"Not an Indian."

"Too quiet," Samoka said. "I don't like it to be so quiet. There's been nothing doing for over a week. My guess is that something big's brewing."

Cortwright said: "If they hold

it off another ten days they'll find an empty nest."

Samoka said curiously: "As soon as that? Nobody tells us anything. They've ironed out the trouble in those rear jets?"

"That row this morning," Cortwright said, "was us checking the jets. All the jets. And all passed. It's straight loading from now on."

Samoka looked up to where the moon was emerging from a dark sea of cloud.

"Right up there and further. Joe, you were on the Revill expedition, before the war. What's it like?"

"Mars? Dry, cold, not enough air to breathe without the auxiliaries. Quite frankly, it only has one advantage that I know of."

"Which is?"

Cortwright gestured out towards





the land beyond the stockade. "It's forty million miles from this lot. And that's a minimum distance."

"Yes. What do you reckon will become of them?"

"The Indians? They'll carry on—fighting their little fights and setting up their little kingdoms; with each generation regressing just a fraction more towards barbarism. Already they've given up books. In five hundred years' time they will be grunting at each other. By that time we shall have Mars blossoming like a garden. To hell with them."

Samoka said uneasily: "I don't know. It's tough in a way. They couldn't help the war. Not all of them could, at any rate."

"They got what they wanted," Cortwright said. "They had their chance. Enough people told them that another war would finish civilization. They wanted their war, and they got it."

"Most of them didn't have any say."

"You ever see sheep going to a slaughter-house? That's what happens to sheep; personally I blame them for it. They had a lot of fun baaing together. What can we do about it, anyway? We can't take them all to Mars."

"No. We can't."

Cortwright laughed. "I should get to bed. I don't object to phil-

osophical conversation except when it loses me my sleep. But don't be afraid to wake me if you hear anything. Anything. I'd rather be roused for a wild goat than risk things at this stage. Coffee in the flask. Night, Ben."

"Night, Joe."

THE attack did not come that night or the night after. The night after that, the waning moon was altogether blanketed by cloud. At three a.m. the camp was awakened by the blare of the hooter, and tumbled out to action stations. The Indians—that was the term by which all those outside the stockade were known in the camp—had managed to get through two lots of wire before tripping the alarm on the inmost wire.

Things were in the balance for perhaps half an hour—the Indians broke through at one point and made an attack into the camp itself. The turning point did not come until Parker managed to get the searchlights round to bear. There was hard fighting still after that, but the superior discipline of the defenders told in the end. By four o'clock they had pulled out. Three of the defenders were wounded, but none of them very seriously. The Indians left one of their number dead. He was a

barrel-chested hairy man of perhaps forty-five. They also left a prisoner.

Cortwright had him pinioned. They dragged him through to the assembly tent in the center of the camp and left him tied up while the damage to the stockade was made good and the outlying alarm wires repaired. Then they went back to have a closer look at him.

He was a young man, no more than twenty-five. He would have been handsome but for the broken nose Cortwright had given him in the course of their struggle. He was dressed, as was usual with the Indians, in all kinds of rags, and he wasn't very clean.

Parker, balancing on his short bandy legs, surveyed him appraisingly.

"Fair specimen." He looked at the dozen or so men surrounding him. "Any suggestions?"

Cortwright said: "We don't need suggestions. We had all this out a long time ago. Holding a prisoner is a risk. Letting a prisoner go, once he's had a chance of seeing the inside of the stockade—particularly of seeing how few of us there are to hold the lines—would be even worse." He glanced at the prisoner. "Don't worry, son. We won't hurt you any more than possible. It will be quick."

Simon, an oldish man indispens-

able by reason of his ability with jets, said slowly:

"Yes, we agreed. In theory. But this is the fact; this is murder."

Parker spoke softly: "Murder presupposes a certain stable condition of society. Between us and the Indians the word has no meaning. From the instant this ship blasts off every other inhabitant of the planet night as well not exist—for us they cease to exist. Our attitude towards them is neutral. The only question is whether this Indian is a danger to the success of our plans or not."

"Exactly," Cortwright said. "And it is irrelevant whether the danger is 99 per cent or one per cent. Either way the only safe thing to do is eliminate him."

Samoka had a jagged gash under his right ear. He was patting it with a piece of rag.

He said: "I don't think it's even one per cent." He looked at Parker. "How long now?"

Parker shrugged: "No secret. A week."

Samoka said: "I know a few rope tricks. I'll guarantee to tie him so he won't get loose. On the big day, we can turn him out. There doesn't need to be any difficulty about this."

Parker said: "I only run this expedition. The rest of you guys

make the decisions. Well, what do we do with the Indian?"

Reprieve had it, by a fair majority. Samoka went to work on the ropes; the others began to drift away.

Cortwright said: "You asked for it—all of you. But I stand to get it along with you."

He stamped off and Parker watched him go. He said to Samoka: "Keep an eye on Cortwright since you're interested in the Indian's health. It might suffer."

A FEMALE element was, of course, necessary for man's new start on Mars. There were actually fifteen women to the eighteen men of the party, but only thirteen of them were of child-bearing age. The exceptions were Parker's wife, who was forty-six, and his ten year old daughter. Parker was the only one of the men who had had a family and been able to keep it intact during the war and the succeeding period of break-down. Reasonably intact, anyway; his son had not come back from Asia. The remaining women had been picked for the expedition for specifically utilitarian reasons. All but a couple had by now paired off with men. That left only six men unattached. Three of these were uninterested; the other three had asked permis-

sion to find a woman among the Indians, but Parker had vetoed it. Quite apart from anything else, there was the problem of mass. Even one extra woman would mean leaving out at least a hundred pounds of invaluable material.

Parker's wife, Helen, was proud of the fact that, as a field mineralogist, she was able to justify her place in the expedition in her own right, and as the hours for which they were to remain on Earth skimmed away she was as busy as the rest in checking equipment and making final preparations. Their daughter, Esme, was the odd person out. Parker gave her the job of looking after the prisoner, adding the precaution of having Samoka check his bonds every couple of hours.

Esme was a small yellow-haired girl, who gave the impression of being younger than she actually was. She was intelligent for her age, and rather self-conscious. She took her job as a guard very seriously, and spent the first day glowering importantly at the prisoner. She yielded him up to the care of the night guard with some reluctance, and was back at her post very early the next morning.

They got talking during that second day. It started as an ordinary request for a drink of water. Esme held it for him. He

raised his head from drinking.

"Thanks, Esme. That was good."

She said distantly: "You're not supposed to use my name."

"No? I'm Bob — Bob Lewin. I've got a sister around your age."

"You're not supposed to talk at all."

"Talking never did anyone any harm. That sister of mine—her name's Louella—she talks all day long."

Esme said, "I had a brother. His name was Dick."

"What happened?"

"He didn't come back."

"Tough. You reckon you're going to like it on Mars?"

She said warily: "You're not supposed to know we're going to Mars."

He grinned. "I've got big ears. Think they might take me along, if I asked nicely?"

She parroted the dictum she knew: "Everyone has got to be indispensable to the new colony. They are all very clever."

"You too?"

"Not yet. But I will be."

"I can see that."

She thought things over for a little while. "Are you clever at anything?" she asked eventually.

He said seriously: "No. I don't think so."

"Then it wouldn't be any good,

anyway—your wanting to come to Mars with us. The people here are the cleverest people in the world."

His voice was grim for a moment. "Yeah. I know that, Esme." He smiled. "I was only joking. I don't really want to go to Mars."

She seized on the point acutely. "Then why did you try to break into the stockade the other night?"

"You forget," he said. We aren't clever. We're the Indians. We just haven't got any sense."

She looked at him, distressed. "Why do you fight and such all the time? Even if you can't go to Mars, you don't have to fight each other."

HE said softly, half to himself: "Someone sowed our fields—not with salt—that's old-fashioned—but with radio-activity. Someone painted our cities so that it's death to go within a mile of them. So we fight for the little that's left." He looked up. "You know what, Esme? My father's the chief in these parts. His territory runs as far as eighty miles to the north. I'll have quite a patch to take over from him some day—quite a patch of desert."

"Someone—you did those things yourselves."

"They told you that? They had it right, too. I was a tank-man. They had it right. Partly right."

"Are things still bad outside?"

"How long is it since you were outside the stockade?"

"Two years. Longer. It's taken a long time to build the spaceship."

"And now it's ready? Yes, it's bad outside. As bad as ever it was. People struggling to grow crops that don't grow; trying to remember how to build bricks without straw; and fighting each other for every little advantage, because people are like that."

Esme said: "I could ask Daddy—if you could come to Mars with us. He's in charge of the expedition, you know."

He smiled. "Don't bother, sis. He couldn't, even if he wanted to. And I wasn't kidding you when I said I didn't want to go to Mars. I'm the son of the local big shot, remember. I've got responsibilities here."

She said: "I am sorry—about things being the way they are."

"If you want to be happy on Mars," he said, "you'll have to grow out of that."

They talked for the rest of the day, and all through the next. They sat together in a still center, surrounded by the stockade's whirlpool of activities. They talked more when people weren't noticing them than on the rare occasions when they were. They didn't speak to each other at all during Samo-

ka's periodical checks on the ropes, which he loosened from time to time and then re-tied.

Samoka made his last check of the day, and Esme stayed on to hand the prisoner over to the night guard. It was Harris, one of the younger men. He threw a brief glance at the man huddled in his bonds, and began his slow patrol of the perimeter.

He was still patrolling twenty minutes later when he was hit on the side of the head with a piece of wood. The blow only partially stunned him. He staggered to his feet and sounded the hooter, but by that time the prisoner was over the stockade and already lost in the shadows beyond.

The camp roused to the alarm.

Cortwright said, with barely controlled fury: "Smart man, Samoka! He guaranteed to tie the Indian so he couldn't get loose!"

Samoka said, "I don't understand. In the old days there weren't more than fifty people in the world who understood that knot. There can't be five now."

Harris, rubbing his head, said: "It doesn't matter if there's only two—one of them's the Indian. For God's sake, Ben, you and your Boy Scout tricks . . ."

Cortwright turned to Harris. "As for you, I'm sorry it wasn't harder. Which way did you vote

when I wanted to have him put down?" He turned savagely towards the rest of the assembly. "And the rest of you sentimentalists—I hope you are satisfied."

Parker said, "That will do, Joe. Let's not make too much of it. He got away and that's that. We blast off in four days, maybe three. I'm putting on a double night guard for that time." He grinned at Samoka. "Ben, there will have to be disciplinary action. You double with Bill Harris for the rest of tonight."

Cortwright insisted. "Doesn't anybody here get it? I tell you, the Indians hate our guts. They guessed what our project was a good time ago. Now they will know we're just about ready to go." He looked at them all in an angry appeal. "Let's put everything into it and get her lifted before tomorrow night. We can do it."

"You've got too much imagination, Joe," Parker said. "That Indian probably won't stop running for three days. And after five years I've no intention of jeopardizing everything by a last-minute rush. We'll lift on schedule, and not before."

Cortwright looked steadily at him for a moment. He said: "All right. You're the boss. But I'm going to triple that guard. The jets

were my job and the jets are ready. Until we blast I'm going to spend my nights on patrol, and get my sleep during the day. Any objection?"

"No objection," Parker said. "Bed for the rest of us."

OLD Simon was one of the two official guards on the last night, and had the sector with the controls for the alarm wires. He heard a noise from inside the camp, and turned to see Esme.

"What is it, Esme?" he asked her.

She said gravely: "I was restless. I just couldn't sleep. I thought I'd like to take a walk."

"Excited?"

"I guess so. What time is it?"

"Nearly two." He gazed around. "It won't do you any harm to sniff the night air. You won't have it again."

"Do we have to go?"

"Why yes. You know how it is. The whole world in chaos. I tell you, Esme, your father is a very remarkable man—to have conceived such an idea and to have carried it through. Just the business of finding the right people in a world of howling barbarians—that was enough by itself."

"And the Indians?"

"They'll have to look after themselves."

She turned and pointed along the perimeter of the stockade. "There! Something moved."

He went two or three yards to investigate. She was standing in the same position when he returned.

"Nothing," he said. "The light's bad; it plays tricks."

The waning moon dipped in and out of clouds.

"I suppose you're right," she said. "I think I'll go back to bed now."

He called after her, "Goodnight."

**H**ALF an hour later the Indians piled over the stockade in four different places. There was no resistance worth talking about, except for Cortwright who went down finally with half a dozen men clinging to him. None of the three men had had time to sound their hooters, or make any noise but a strangled squawk. The Indians moved in purposefully towards the tents and the space ship. Then it was all over.

In the long line of trussed-up men, Parker found himself next to Simon with Cortwright badly battered and unconscious, beyond him.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Simon said: 'I got a look at the control board while they were tying me up. The wires were cut.'"

Parker was very calm. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry—but Esme had been out there with me. She said she couldn't sleep. She distracted me for a few moments. That must have been enough."

Parker said: "That accounts for something else, too. The mysterious escape of our Indian." He raised himself with difficulty into a half-sitting position.

"Esme!" he called.

She came obediently from one of the tents. Her father said: "I suppose there wouldn't be any point in asking you to cut me loose as you did the Indian?"

"No, Pop." She gestured towards the figures of the attackers, now moving purposefully about the camp. "They wouldn't let me."

"Have you got any idea," he asked her, "of what you have done—and helped these people to do?"

One of the figures detached from the rest and came towards them. Esme turned as she was called.

"Bob!" she said gladly.

The ex-prisoner swung her up off her feet.

"Glad to see you again, sis. Everything O.K.?"

Parker said, "I hope you will have the decency to take her away, before . . ."

Bob said, "Before . . . ?"



"Before you dispose of us."

Bob laughed. He said to Esme, "Your father thinks we are going to slit his throat, and everyone else's."

She said: "Oh, no, Pop!"

Parker said to the young man, "Why have you hated us so much? Because we had found a way of getting out of the mess the world is in now? Couldn't you just let us go? We weren't interfering with you. What's been behind all the attacks—just envy?"

Bob didn't answer him. He pointed towards the spaceship, a spire resting on immense haunches in the first grey light of dawn.

"See those men?" he asked. "Know what they're doing?"

A dozen or more men were busy round the base of the rocket.

"You're not going to . . ." Parker began, and left the sentence unfinished.

"She's almost ready to blow," Bob said with satisfaction. "Only a rough job. Just enough to tip her over."

Parker said, in a choked voice: "There's five years' work in that ship. Five years' work and all the future of mankind."

"Mankind," Bob said softly. "Mankind—strictly excluding Indians."

The figures continued to move around the base of the ship. Then

they began to troop away.

"Call them off!" Parker said. "We'll build another rocket. You can come with us."

"Bob shook his head. "We don't want to go to Mars."

"Then what do you want?" Parker cried. "Do you only want to destroy? Hasn't there been enough destruction on this planet to satisfy you?"

Bob said, "When I was tied up, Esme said something to me. She said the people in this stockade were the cleverest on the planet. Was that right?"

Parker's eyes were fixed in a kind of desperation, on the slender but immense needle of the spaceship.

He said, "No, of course not. But I picked the best people I could find for this—naturally, for a job of this kind."

"All the clever guys," Bob said. "The rest of us—the Indians—we have always been pretty stupid. We've fought and chiselled each other. But the clever guys gave us the chance to really do it brown. So we busted the world apart and here we are among the ruins. And at that point the clever guys decided to move out—to move out and start again. The only thing is: it isn't going to happen that way."

"Then what way?" Parker said.

"Your way? Petty tribes, becoming petty kingdoms, even petty empires on a ruined planet—what use can we be to you?"

Bob leaned towards him. "I don't know. Maybe no use at all. But maybe a lot of use. All I know is this—that it took a lot to test that rocket ship up there, ready to blast off to Mars. And you are going to put that much, and ten times that much, into putting things right

here on Earth instead. All of you."

There was a rosy flare behind him, followed by the crump of explosive. The spaceship tilted, faster and faster, and shook the ground with its eventual impact.

He straightened up. "Now," he said, "we're all Indians. He caught hold of Esme and lifted her onto his shoulder.

"O.K., sis. Time to start working."

## THE END

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**STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF IMAGINATION, Stories of Science and Fantasy, published monthly at Evanston, Illinois for February, 1954.**

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WILLIAM L. HAMLING, Editor.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 23rd day of September, 1953.

(SEAL)

WENZEL A. PELZ.

(My commission expires May 27, 1956)

## ★ Limitless Universe ★

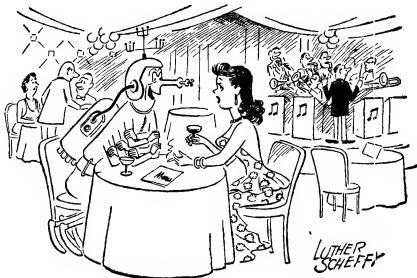
**B**ASED primarily on the use of the one hundred inch Mount Wilson telescope, astronomers have estimated the size of the universe at one to three hundred million light years across. This inconceivable size was a sort of "educated guess" to be supplanted perhaps when more was known.

Already the two hundred inch telescope of Mount Palomar indicates that it was a conservative guess indeed. Based upon the huge instrument's light-gathering power, some observers are suggesting the figure be doubled or trebled!

Several have half-facetiously remarked that the size of the universe depends on how big the observing telescope is . . .

To a certain extent this may be more than just a joke. There seems to be no reason to believe in an arbitrary limit determined by the telescope. It has been suggested by philosopher-astronomers that the word "infinite" must be ascribed to the size of the universe. A billion light years is a mere nothing, as much as our minds quail at this overwhelming figure!

\* \* \*



"Let's go up to my place!"



# GREETINGS FROM EARTH!

*By*

*Sherwood Springer*

**Zantenean spy tricks were old stuff to the Supreme Sky Council of Azkath. So naturally a visitor from space needed a convincing story!**

**Z**GURAT'S black taloned fist descended in fury. It struck the table top with a force that threatened to split the quagmite veneering, and sent glasses and pellet trays jumping the length of the great table.

"It's a lie!" he roared. "It's impossible, it's preposterous, it's ridiculous. He's a spy from Zantenea!"

"But, General," several voices objected at once, "he has two eyes, and—"

"Bah! Any fool knows they've got the matter 'translator now. They could give him ten eyes."

"But he has—"

Thoven Mu, commissioner of commerce, and chairman pro tem of the Sky Council of Azkath, pressed a stud which sent a buzzing vibration into the seat of every chair at the table. It got results far quicker than any gavel.

"Let me ask you, General," he said as the tumult ended abruptly, "have you, yourself, seen this creature?"

"I don't have to see him. I've seen his ship."

"Are you trying to imply his ship's Zantenean?"

"I'm implying nothing. Look here, Mu, I know what your motive is in wanting to believe this scoundrel. Already you're counting the profits Azkath might make in opening up trade with Draor III. And I can see that fat talon of yours right in the middle of the pie." Zgurat's tone grew heavily sarcastic. "Maybe you and the rest of these gentlemen don't know there's a war on. The Zantenean situation comes first, and this impostor's strictly my business. I see no point in making it a Council matter."

Thoven Mu was calmly unmov-

ed by the general's outburst, indicating the latter's corrosive tongue was no novelty. "The very fact that there is a difference of opinion concerning this visitor makes it a Council matter," he said quietly. "If evidence indicates he is indeed a spy, I assure you he will be turned over to the Office of Security forthwith, and you can deal with him as you like."

Another councilor was quick to direct a question at the general. "You say you've seen his ship. I've seen it, too. How can you possibly suggest such an antiquated craft can be Zantenean?"

"Blast it all, that's the point," Zgurat burst out. "Are you blind?"

"But our latest galaxy survey shows—"

"I know, I know. I can read surveys, too. You're trying to tell me this ship is just like those used in the Draor system."

"Exactly. And this creature is unmistakably an example of the people the survey observed on Draor III."

"And on top of that," another councilor put in, "he admits he's from Draor III."

"Bah," the general's disgust was painfully obvious, "you're all imbeciles. Zantenea makes galaxy surveys, too—or didn't you know? Did you imagine this joker would stand up and say he was a Zan-

tenean spy? How stupid can you get?"

"I'm afraid, General," Thoven Mu interrupted, "you've failed to make your point clear about this ship. Just what—"

"Bring the faker in, and I'll make it clear enough," Zgurat boomed.

The chairman glanced inquiringly around the table. "Any objections, gentlemen? Shall we proceed?"

As nods of assent greeted his great eye, one of his flawlessly manicured talons flipped a switch on the microphone-like polyhedron beside his chair.

"Bring in the visitor," he directed.

A CIRCULAR opening appeared in one wall, and a weirdly shaped creature stepped through the portal, followed by two escorts. The newcomer was wearing a harness of strange flexible material that covered nearly his entire body. His hide, what there was to be seen of it, appeared thin and unbelievably pale. An odd, reddish growth of fur sprouted from his cranium, and he had *two* eyes. And no talons. His upper limbs ended in a small quintuple arrangement of sub-limbs.

Several of the councilors who had not previously seen the stran-

ger and who were not familiar with many bizarre outer species, swallowed audibly. Zgurat sniffed scornfully at their amazement.

At a gesture from Thoven Mu, the escorts showed the visitor to a dais in one corner where the Cul-lom-Rex language converter stood. An adjustable headpiece, equipped with oral, auditory and lobe contacts, was slipped over his reddish thatch, and the creature already familiar with the contrivance, began making his own adjustments. Thoven Mu dismissed the escorts and rose to his full eight-foot height. "Gentlemen," he announced sonorously, "I give you the spaceman from Draor III, first of his race ever to reach across the star lanes to the Empire of Azkath."

Zgurat scowled, but held his peace. The chairman turned toward the dais. "Can you understand my words, spaceman?"

"Easy," the stranger's voice issued from the speaker of the converter.

"Then I wish to present to you the Supreme Sky Council of the empire. We have arranged this hearing tonight to give you an opportunity to explain your mission and possibly convince several of our members your accomplishment is a reality, and not—well, an illusion. Are you prepared for questioning?"

"Fire away."

"First, how are you married?"

"Miller, Bill Miller, Cleveland, Ohio, U. S. A."

"My word. Does everyone of your race have a name that long?"

"Long? You ought to hear some of them."

Thoven Mu held up his talons. "Never mind," he said quickly. "Tell the Council something of your flight—and particularly why you came alone."

"That's easy," the spaceman grinned ruefully. "Nobody else was crazy enough to join me. Besides, there wasn't room enough. The crate was jammed to the gills with fuel as it was."

"Are you implying it would have required an insane person to make the trip?"

"Well, that's what the brain trust said. You see, we had the solar system pretty well licked. One expedition had even got out as far as Uranus—that's the seventh planet from the sun—and back. But taking off for the stars was a different story. Rocket ships are too slow for deep space, and there didn't seem any way to lick the fuel problem."

"That's one point we have discussed. Your presence here indicates the voyage *was* made. How did you manage it?"

MILLER looked down at his boots for a moment. "Well, everybody I talked to seemed to think I was off my rocker. Plenty of them told me so. But I'd nursed an idea for years, and then one day I got back to port after a long patrol flight to Venus, and found my girl had married some space lawyer. The news sort of broke me up, and I decided then and there to hell with everything, I was going to do something about that star flight.

"So I finagled a release from the navy and got busy—but about all I got in the next six months were brush offs and horselaughs. Except one thing. Publicity. By that time probably half the people on earth knew me by my pictures and could spot me a mile away. It was a good thing, too, the way it turned out.

"Some big advertising guy got in touch with me and said he could make arrangements for a ship and supplies if I'd sign over to him a lot of news and publicity rights. First thing I said, 'Where's a pen?'

"So that's how Trans-Ecliptic Press and Mello-Yello cigarettes finally put up the dough. Scientists were scoffing—but you can bet the public ate up the stories, so I guess those outfits got their money's worth."

"None of this, however," Thov-

en Mu put in, "explains your flight itself."

"I'm getting to that," Miller went on. "In the first place, the idea had one big objection. It was a one-way proposition. If it worked, there was no going back—but I just didn't give a damn. All I wanted was fuel to get out past Gruen, the eleventh planet, and have some left for a landing."

"But you were fully nineteen light-transits from Azkath," one of the councilors interrupted. "Do you mean to tell us you traveled that distance by rocket power?"

"Well," the pilot grinned disarmingly, "not exactly. You see, it's this way. Sol—you call it Draor—is out on one limb of the galaxy, as you know. The whole business is spinning, and Sol is tearing along about 19 kilometers a second in the direction of the constellation of Hercules. We called that the sun's apex. In the opposite direction was the antapex, where other stars were tearing along behind us. All I did was fly my crate out beyond the solar system along toward the antapex. There I set my automatics, took a long sleep in a zero stasis box, and just waited for the next star to catch up with me."

"WHAT!" Zgurat bellowed. He shot to his feet, a purple glow suffusing his gray-black features.



"That's all there was to it," Miller repeated. "I just sort of hibernated there, and waited for you to catch up."

The general appeared on the verge of apoplexy. His next move was so swift and unexpected no one at the table had time to forestall it.

His blue gzat leaped into his hand, buzzed angrily, and a black hole suddenly split Miller's forehead directly between his eyes. The spaceman crumpled lifeless to the floor.

A paralysis of horror seemed to grip the assembly. For a full dial-circuit there was not a sound. Then the spell was broken abruptly. Amid the bedlam of cries, gasps, and scraping chairs, Zgurat calmly replaced his weapon. Thoven Mu was staring at him aghast.

"General," the latter said at last, fighting to control his voice, "I consider what you have done the gravest breach of—"

"Commissioner, Commissioner!" There was sudden commotion among the group who had rushed to the dais. "Here, quick!"

Zgurat alone was left at the table as the others joined the milling councilors. Unconcerned, he was sure what they would find there.

"A Zantenean!" someone exclaimed. "He *was* a spy."

For there on the floor behind the Cullom-Rex, a strange metamorphosis was taking place. Artificially translated molecules, no longer held in place by the chemistry of life, were gradually assuming their original structure.

Within a few dial-circuits nothing remained of the Draor III creature save the sundered fragments of his harness. Instead, a score of astonished eyes were staring at the gross and sprawling form of a taloned Zantenean.

Thoven Mu was the first to turn toward the lone figure who was now striding away from the table.

"But, General," he began, both confused and relieved by the turn of events, "I want to say—"

"Bah!" Zgurat cut him off. "Say it to the others."

"Tell us," someone else broke in, "how you were so certain—"

The general had already reached the door. He turned for a moment and regarded the group with disgust. "Just sat in space and waited!" he scoffed in fine scorn. "Did you never hear of Zogarev's Third Law? Hell's Plates, it would be just as easy to rise ten feet off the surface of Azkath and wait for it to revolve beneath you. Garbage! I've got a war on."

He turned and stalked through the opening, the sliding panels banging together behind him.

**I**N a certain room deep in the subterranean Intelligence Building at Stangarmail military headquarters on the neighboring planet of Zantenea, a technician was staring at a huge chart which spanned one wall. A green light on that chart had just blinked out.

The technician checked the coordinates quickly to make certain there was no mistake, then called his chief on the intercom.

In a staff room some distance away, General Steelweg listened for a few moments and cut the connection. He turned to another member of the general staff. "Conniv's blinked out," he said bleakly. "They must have trapped him somehow."

General Kreazn shook his head slowly. "It was too brazen, too fantastic. I told you it couldn't work."

"But the translator job on Conniv was flawless, you know that. And the ship—who could argue

about that? And Conniv's story—my God, man, he got it from the implanter. Every word of it, every inflection was perfect. How could—"

"You don't understand," Kreazn interrupted. "I'm the first to admit your job was a masterpiece. The masquerade was perfect. It's that confounded flight from Draor III in a bucket of bolts that's at fault. It's preposterous. Any third-rate scientist could shoot it full of holes."

Steelweg stared at the other in amazement. "The flight? The flight itself? Why, man, that's the one thing in the whole plot that—"

"I know, I know. We all know. That doesn't make it any less preposterous." Kreazn rose and began pacing down the room.

"Incidentally," he asked at length, "what are you going to do with the real Bill Miller?"

THE END

**FEATURED NEXT MONTH:—**

## **TYRANTS OF TIME**

By

**MILTON LESSER**

A gripping novel of adventure in the Time lanes, as men of a far future reach back to the 20th Century to change the course of history. Don't miss this story of intrigue through time — it could be happening today!

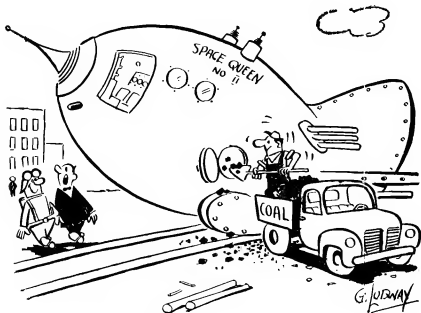
**—MARCH ISSUE OF IMAGINATION ON SALE JANUARY 29th—**

## ★ In The Ocean Depths ★

**M**EN know more about the Moon, it has been said, than about the bottom of the ocean! This lack of knowledge is in the process of being corrected. Numerous oceanographic institutes have been designing and operating cameras and TV apparatus intended to operate at four and five mile depths.

Photographs and specimens taken at these depths show a world as

weird and fantastic as anything the planets will have to offer. Bathyspheric devices containing human beings can afford a trip to the nautical underworld, a trip which in its isolation, is more terrifying than a flight to the Moon. Not the least hope of undersea explorers, is the detection of possible buried civilizations, for the legend of Atlantis is more than a guess . . .



"—and Man! Wait 'til you see its power plant!"

# BLESSED EVENT

*By*

*Charles F. Myers*





**He was the millionth quadrillionth baby to be born on Earth. Naturally the event had to be celebrated. And it was—in a devastating manner!**

**G**INNY stood anxiously in the kitchen doorway, wiping her hands on the hem of her apron.

"You shouldn't upset the boy by yelling at him, Lester," she said. "I know you're worried, but . . ."

"He upsets me, doesn't he?" Lester said defensively. He sat in the lounge chair by the window, and the light from the reading lamp, slanting across his face,

sketched in the lines of consternation with dark shadows. "Just look at that class paper!" he exploded. "'Excellent,' it says. That's four 'excellents' already this month!"

"I know," Ginny said quietly. "I saw it when he brought it home this afternoon." Her blue eyes misted. "He was awfully proud."

"The worst comment he's ever had was a 'very good,'" Lester said heedlessly. "If only he'd get a

'poor' once in a while—or even a 'rotten.' But that's too much to hope for."

"Maybe it's not really as bad as it seems," Ginny said hopefully. "He said himself that he's weak in spelling."

"Not weak enough for comfort," Lester said. "That little head of his is just crammed with brains. Sometimes I look at it and all I can think of is a stuffed bell pepper!" Suddenly his grey eyes came alight with inspiration. "Maybe if we cut down on his food—They say in those ads that if a child is properly undernourished he begins to get sluggish and . . ."

"Lester!" Ginny said, thoroughly shocked. "Of all things!"

For a moment they were silent, not quite looking at each other.

"Where did he go?" Ginny asked finally.

"Into his room," Lester sighed. "To study, no doubt."

Ginny nodded and moved toward the entrance to the hall. "I'd better see if he's all right," she said. "You really shouldn't have yelled at him."

Lester watched broodingly as she left the room. For a moment his gaze remained darkly fixed, then moved back and down to the toes of his shoes. He sighed again, and the lines of worry, as though of sheer exhaustion, relaxed.

In repose, Lester's face, an av-

erage specimen in the galloping run of the world's faces, was not unpleasant. It was a face that had been come by honestly, if not spectacularly, in the thirty-one years of its existence. In total, Lester was a tolerable young man, though one had the feeling that if he played tennis and wore tennis shorts—neither of which he did—he would prove a bit knobby in the knee and bowed in the leg.

As for Ginny, she was the completely average companion piece to Lester's average man. Her hair was honey-colored, her features were regular and her figure, though a trifle fleshier than the dented-fender types photographed for the magazines, was highly desirable. Together, Lester and Ginny were, in all but one respect, very nearly indistinguishable from the millions of other like couples who predominately inhabit the nation. The single thing that set them apart from the mob was a marked tendency to shatter like a couple of dropped crystal goblets at the sight of an 'excellent' on their male child's class papers.

This oddness, this single curious distinction, however, was no indication of mere capriciousness. The root of the trouble was firmly set in reality, and if its subsequent fruit appeared somewhat eccentric it was probably because those forces which had dropped the orig-

inal seed into the soil of Lester and Ginny's young lives had not made themselves and their motives clearly understood. It is not, after all, uncommon for the human animal to fear that which it cannot understand, and so it was with Lester and Ginny.

**I**T all started on the night that young Freddie was born. Preparations for the little newcomer's arrival (though it was not known then whether it was to be Frederick or Frederica) had gone apace for several months, and the doctor and the hospital had been engaged well in advance. Ginny, according to custom, had been assiduously showered by her friends with every gadget and garment that any manufacturer, domestic or foreign, had ever rendered in pink and/or blue. The stage was set, swept and lighted. The curtain rose.

It was exactly one minute past three A.M. when Lester raced for the front door, fell over the overnight bag which had been placed strategically in the path, picked himself up and hurried outside to back the Chevy coupe out of the garage and up to the porch. Leaping out, he hurried back into the house to help Ginny to the car and nearly collided with her in the doorway.

"It's all right, Gin!" he said excitedly. "It's all going to be all

right!"

"I know, dear," Ginny said uncertainly and, picking up the felled bag, carried it swiftly past him to the car. "Don't forget to lock the door."

"Now, don't worry, honey," Lester said as he climbed into the car beside her, "just don't think about it." He started the engine and began backing toward the street. "Just think how nice it's going to be to have a baby all our own."

Ginny put a hand to his sleeve. "I love you, Lester," she murmured, and let it go at that.

It was approximately at this point in the proceedings that certain celestial complications began to set in. As Lester and Ginny sped toward the hospital, their heads filled with the approaching disaster of parenthood they were totally unaware of a distant moiling and broiling in the night-darkened heavens above them. Humanly earthbound as they were, their thinking was characteristically horizontal. It would never in a million years have occurred to them that their real trouble lay, not ahead of them, but above them.

**H**IGH in those dim and timeless reaches of space without measure where the fate of mortal man is weighed and judged ac-

cording to the individual, a storm of unique and dismaying design was at the moment of its inception. Like many another event of eventual magnitude it began with deceptive insignificance. It was merely that Mac, that kindly and somewhat addled angel, in tallying the lists on the tabulation sheets, had come on the knowledge that the very next baby, the one due for the four A.M. shipment, would be the million quadrillionth baby born on Earth since the beginning of the human race. It was a fact from which Mac seemed to derive a certain surprised pleasure. Brushing aside an intervening cloud vapor, he turned to Haywood Veere, his heavenly co-worker, and grinned importantly.

"Right on the nose, Haywood!" he announced loudly. "The million quadrillionth baby. What do you think of that?" He twitched his wings happily. "Makes you feel kind of important, don't it?"

Haywood remained studiously bent over his dispatch sheets. "I fail to see why," he said with characteristic dryness. "We can hardly look on the event as any sort of personal accomplishment. It took all of humanity all this while to bring it about."

"But I'm the one that marked it down," Mac said. "And it's you who's makin' out the papers on him. Probably nobody knows

about it except us."

"It's probably just as well," Haywood murmured.

"But it's kind of like an anniversary," Mac insisted. "Don't you see?" A grin of reminiscence came over his homely face. "Besides, I done my part, I guess, when I was a mortal. I had a couple of kids—even if they did both wind up in the pokey."

At this Haywood glanced up from the cloud bank upon which were spread the papers. He turned around slowly, holding his wings back with one hand so that they would not get smudged with ink. He regarded Mac reflectively.

"I suppose that's true," he said. "If you want to look at it that way we can all take a bit of the credit. Even I can."

Mac's eyes widened with surprise. "But you was never married," he said. "If you had kids then they was . . ."

"I didn't," Haywood put in quickly. "But it still works out. If you hadn't fathered your children and I hadn't—refrained, so to speak, this particular baby wouldn't be the million quadrillionth baby at all. It's curious the way it all works out."

"Sure it is!" Mac said triumphantly. "You see, it's like I said, a sort of millstone!"

"Mile stone," Haywood corrected absently. "I suppose you could



regard the little chap as a sort of anniversary baby at that."

"You're darned right!" Mac nodded emphatically. "It's like we ought to do something about it—to kind of celebrate—like when a show house has fifty thousand customers and the fifty thousandth guy gets a free ticket or a smoke stand with a naked lady on top."

"But that's all in the line of advertising," Haywood said primly. "Crass commercialism."

"And what's wrong with advertising about babies?" Mac asked. "Babies are the best darned product in the world. It's about time something was done to stimulate trade, I guess."

"Well, I really doubt . . . " Haywood began.

"You never was a father," Mac broke in elegantly. "It's a very broadening experience, even when your kids turn out to be brats."

"But don't you think," Haywood mused, "that it's rather been taken care of—the stimulation part of it, I mean?"

"Not near enough," Mac said firmly, "not when there are guys like you who get left out."

**A**N introspective look came into Haywood's intelligent eyes. "Perhaps you're right," he said quietly. "Working here in the dispatching office has given me pause to think from time to time."

He tapped his slender fingers soundlessly on the cloud-bank, producing a series of delicately swirled vapors. "But we haven't any free tickets or smoke stands with naked ladies to give away—and no way to give them, even if we had."

"Then we'll have to give something else," Mac said solemnly. "Something like it's not something you can touch and pick up, but something like maybe these people can just think about it and it will make them happy."

Haywood nodded. "You mean something more of a spiritual order."

"Yeah. I guess that's it."

For a moment the two of them were thoughtfully silent. Presently Haywood stopped drumming his fingers.

"How would it be," he said, "if we made their baby a very special baby in some way? All parents are fond of the notion that their first child is the most extraordinary child ever born. Suppose we find some way to make this anniversary baby really unusual?"

"Why sure!" Mac said jubilantly. "That's it! I always said you had brains, Haywood."

"Thank you, Mac" Haywood said uncertainly. "But what special quality shall we give this child? Can you think of anything?"

For a moment they stared at each other blankly. Mac twitched a wing.

"How about three hands?" he asked. "People are always saying how they wished they had three hands. It would make the kid a big help around the house."

"You've been away from Earth too long, Mac," Haywood said gently. "You know how unpleasant people can be to freaks."

"Oh, yeah," Mac said deflatedly. "I forgot."

"I don't think a physical difference is wise," Haywood went on. "I think something more from within would be better. Mortals are always wishing to be completely good and honest. At least they pray about it a good deal . . ."

Mac shook his head. "You can't be too good or too honest down there, Haywood. Sometimes it turns into a vice. Besides, people get suspicious and make things very hard for you. That's why the good ones never stay too long."

"You're quite right," Haywood conceded. "But we've got to think of something. I should be finishing up the dispatch right now. If I'm going to add anything to the orders I'd better do it."

"There must be something," Mac said anxiously. "What else do people always wish for?"

"Well . . ." Haywood mused. Then, quite unexpectedly, he smiled

one of his rare smiles. "I have it! How many times have you heard people wish that they had known at some previous point in their lives something that they have only managed to find out later?"

"Huh?" Mac said.

"You know the expression, 'if I had only known then what I know now.' People are constantly saying how much better things would be if they had only been born with the knowledge of a lifetime. How would it be if we arrange to have this child born knowing everything that he's destined to learn throughout all his earthly years?"

"You mean so he can see into the future?"

"No, no, nothing so trite as that. Just let him know at the outset all the things that he will eventually learn so that he may apply them to his life as he goes along."

Mac slapped his broad hands together with enthusiastic approval. "Hey, that's wonderful!" he said. "It sounds classy, too. We make this million quadrillionth baby the most wised-up kid any pair of parents ever had. Write that down, Haywood, just like you said it. Put it in the special specifications part."

"All right," Haywood said, rather pleased with himself, "then, that's what it'll be." He turned carefully back to the cloud bank, wriggled his knees into its fleecy confines

and took up his pen. "I'll have to word it carefully so there won't be any oversight."

"Gosh!" Mac grinned rapturously, "just think how tickled those parents are going to be. It makes you feel good just thinking about it!"

**H**AIR rumped and necktie askew, Lester sat in the hospital waiting room and smoked endless cigarettes. Across from him sat another young man in a similar state of disheveled conflagration, but the two of them did not speak. The situation was understood and words would only make it worse. Time passed.

At last a door swung open and a nurse with a starched expression and a severe uniform stepped flat-footedly into the room. In unison Lester and his companion sat up and looked around like a pair of beagles alerted to the scent of the fox. There was an ominous pause while the nurse, indulging a sadistic sense of the dramatic, looked questioningly from one to the other.

"Mr. Holmes?" she asked crisply.

"Yes!" Lester said, leaping from his chair. "Yes, yes! That's me!"

The nurse regarded him slowly, as though finding only what she had expected, which wasn't much. "Your wife," she announced thin-

ly, "has just given birth to a healthy six pound boy." She edged back toward the door, then stopped. "Congratulations," she added grudgingly.

"Holy smoke!" Lester said. "Can I see Ginny?"

The nurse eyed him levelly. "Ginny?" she enquired.

"My mother!" Lester said confusedly, making a Freudian slip. "I mean, my wife, the mother of my son. You know . . ." he ended lamely.

"Mrs. Holmes will be resting for the next couple of hours," the nurse said, "and she mustn't be disturbed. Meanwhile, if you'd care to see your son, he will appear shortly in the nursery, in the crib marked with your name. You may view him through the glass partition."

"Oh," Lester said. "Oh, sure. But, Ginny — Mrs. Holmes — how is she?"

"She came through the delivery splendidly," the nurse told him and left.

Grinning, Lester turned to the other young man who looked back at him numbly. "Well . . ." he said. "Golly!" He waited for a moment, then shrugged happily and started toward the door.

**H**E paced back and forth in front of the plate glass window, nervously eyeing the first

row of metal cribs which contained the one marked "Holmes." His crib, or rather the crib of his son, was exactly like all the others in the line, except that it had remained starkly unoccupied for some time now and for that reason seemed somehow larger and more ominous than the others. Absently, Lester was aware of other sleepy-eyed fathers along the window, and of the occasional presence, within the panelled confines of the nursery, of nurses, moving back and forth like the masked ladies of some frightfully pristine and hygienic India.

From time to time, these last would bring a baby forward to the viewing window for the inspection of the fathers who were already planning complications for the little newcomer's life. Lester watched as a sandy-haired young man with dark shadows under his eyes moved to the speaking tube at the side of the window and briefly requested an introduction to his newborn daughter. Within the nursery one of the nurses nodded to him and said a polite "yes, sir," which was communicated to the young man over a concealed speaker. Waiting until the young man had departed, Lester followed his example and edged up to the tube. There was another nurse conveniently at hand.

"Miss," he said mildly, "Nurse."

The young lady turned and regarded him from over her mask with a pair of large brown eyes. "Yes?" she asked. "Are you one of the fathers?"

"I—yes," Lester nodded. "Only my baby isn't in the nursery yet, and it's been quite a while now since they sent me here to see him."

A flicker of puzzlement showed in the nurse's eyes. "What is the name, please?" she asked.

"Holmes," Lester said. "Lester Holmes. It's a boy. Six pounds. If that helps you any."

The brown eyes changed expression swiftly and unexpectedly. They raked Lester's face hastily, as though passing over some object too loathsome for closer observation. It seemed to Lester that the exposed part of the nurse's complexion turned a ghastly white.

"Good grief!" the girl said over the speaker and hurried out of the room.

"Hey!" Lester said, bending closer to the tube. "Hey, nurse!"

He stood there for a moment, feeling vague stirrings of impending doom, then he moved back. Inside the nursery the door opened and two nurses, neither with large brown eyes, stepped inside, stared hauntedly in his direction for a moment, then disappeared again. Lester watched this denouement with utter bewilderment. He re-

treated to the far side of the room and sat down in a chair with iron legs and slippery red plastic cushions.

Lester was still sitting there, without benefit of spurs, when the doctor came in. He was a tall, pinkish sort of man, balding of head and jittery of manner. He leaned down to Lester as though preparing to say a very confidential and filthy word.

"Holmes?" he enquired.

"Yes!" Lester said, starting. "That's me."

"Would you just step out here in the hall for a moment?"

Lester got up and silently followed the doctor outside. The door to the waiting room sighed shut behind them, and for a moment they stood looking at each other.

"Mr. Holmes . . ." the doctor said, then lapsed into undecided silence.

Lester made a small gesture with his hand. "Look, doctor," he said. "I know I'm not familiar with the way things are done around a hospital, but frankly I'm beginning to get a little worried."

"Of course you are," the doctor said emphatically.

"Huh?" Lester said.

"Expectant fathers are always worried," the doctor said and smiled stiffly.

"I'm not expectant any more,"

Lester said. "The nurse said everything was all right, that the baby was healthy and Ginny was doing fine."

The doctor looked at him, as though with sudden inspiration. "Would you like to see your wife, Mr. Holmes?" he asked quickly.

"Yes," Lester said. "I'd like to see *someone*."

A look of momentary relief lighted the doctor's face. "Fine," he said, "fine. And when you've finished we'll have a little talk, eh? Now, just come along this way."

**G**INNY, in the tall, awkward hospital bed, looked kind of pinched and stringy, like she always did in the summer when she'd spent a day canning fruit. As Lester entered, she smiled in a slack-mouthed sort of way.

"Hello, dear," she said weakly.

"Hi," Lester said.

"Daddy," Ginny said dreamily. "You're a daddy now."

"And you're a mother," Lester said foolishly.

"Yes," Ginny murmured. "You are a daddy and I'm a mother. Both at the same time." She smiled again. "It's funny."

"Funny?" Lester said. He sat down on the edge of the bed and took her hand. "How do you mean?"

"The anesthetic was funny,"

Ginny said, and suddenly she giggled.

Lester looked at her worriedly. "Did anything happen?" he asked. "Besides the baby, I mean?"

"Oh, just something I imagined," Ginny said. "But it was so clear it was like it was real." She looked at him from between half-closed lids and giggled again. "When the doctor spanked the baby—you know how they do—he said, 'Stop that, you big ape! Try swatting someone your own size!'"

"The doctor said that?"

"No, the baby," Ginny said. "Wasn't it funny the way I imagined all that?"

Lester forced a smile. "Yeah," he said, "sure."

Just then a nurse, eyeing Lester with uneasy speculation, edged quietly into the room. "You'll have to leave now, Mr. Holmes," she said. "The doctors are waiting for you."

"Doctors?" Lester said, then decided to let it go; the hospital had become a dark and mysterious place. He leaned down and kissed Ginny lightly on the lips. "Get some rest, dear," he murmured.

THERE were six doctors in the little office, an assorted half dozen of varying sizes and ages. The white-coated oath-taker with whom Lester had shared the cryp-

tic conversation in the hall presided over the gathering from behind a desk at the far side of the room. The others sat in chairs that had been arranged against the walls. All of them eyed Lester with something like grave wonder as he moved forward and took his seat in front of the desk. Lester looked hopefully from one to the other, then cleared his throat. The small doctor to his left jumped.

"I realize," Lester said, "that I'm not acquainted with hospital routine. This is the first time . . ."

"Of course, Mr. Holmes," the pinkish doctor put in quickly, with a sort of reverent horror. "And I must confess that procedures have necessarily been a trifle irregular in this case . . ."

"Case?" Lester said. "What's wrong, doctor? Why won't you tell me?"

The doctor folded his pale, slender hands before him with intricate care. "Mr. Holmes," he said gently, "have you ever taken an I. Q. test?"

Lester stared at him blankly for a moment. He was conscious of a sinking sensation, much as though he were a cake in an oven and someone had slammed a door somewhere. "Yes, I have," he said cautiously. "I don't remember the score exactly. They said I was average. Is there something

wrong with my son, doctor?"

Again the doctor avoided a direct reply. "How about your wife, has she ever had an intelligence test?"

"I don't know," Lester answered truthfully. "She's mentioned several times that she only graduated from school by the skin of her teeth. But what has that got to do with . . ."

"I wonder, Mr. Holmes, if you'd be willing to submit to an extensive examination and observation? It might take about a month or so, I'm afraid. You work for a bank, don't you?"

Lester nodded. "I'm a teller at the People's Trust. But . . ."

"Perhaps we could make arrangements with your employer for a leave of absence . . ."

The doctor broke off as the door suddenly burst open and a nurse charged into the room. She was an uncommonly homely woman whose face would have been attractive only coming down the stretch in the fifth at Pimlico. Her cap was askew and her red mane had gotten loose from its moorings. Breathing heavily, she pulled up abruptly in front of the desk and glared furiously at the doctor.

"I quit!" she bellowed, banging her fist down on the desk. "I will not be referred to as that splay-footed, cold-fingered old

nag! Especially not by any mere infant!"

"Miss Klatt!" the doctor said sternly. "We're in conference with a patient!"

"I don't care if you're in Tucson with Marilyn Monroe!" the nurse yelled. "I'm quitting. In fact, I've quit. If it's a nurse for babies you want, then okay, but if you're looking for a verbal punching bag for a three-hour old comic, you can damn well look somewhere else!"

"Miss Klatt!"

"Phooey!" Miss Klatt responded hotly. "Just call me up sometime to come back to work and listen to my hollow laughter. And as for that new-layed yegg you call a baby, you'll find him in his crib in the nursery!" And with that she turned on her heel and stalked from the room, slamming the door. There was a moment of horrified silence.

"Oh, dear!" one of the doctors said distractedly. "Oh, dear!"

The pinkish doctor leaped out of his chair. "Holy smoke!" he yelled. "Did she say she put him in the nursery?"

He raced for the door, and his five colleagues rose hastily and followed in his trail. Lester jumped up and followed after.

"Hey!" he hollered. "Hey, wait a minute!"

LESTER arrived in the viewing room only a step behind the doctors. Already, it appeared, quite a crowd had assembled in the room, a random mixture of staff members and visitors. There was an excited murmuring, along with a general tendency to back away from the viewing panel. The doctors had stopped in their tracks just inside the door, in a collective attitude of stricken dismay. For a moment Lester was completely at a loss to discover the cause of all this, then a voice, a very small but distinct voice, echoed over the speaker.

"And you, too, fatso!" it said sharply. "Just what do you think you're staring at?"

Lester became aware of a large, dark-haired woman who suddenly gasped and backed away. Her lips worked feverishly over words that would not come.

"It's an invasion of privacy!" the voice continued furiously. "I stand on my rights! And I'll sit and lie down on them, too, if I have to! I demand a private room!"

During this pithy bit of dialogue, Lester edged cautiously through the ranks and peered into the brilliant inner reaches of the nursery. At first he saw nothing of particular note, then, slowly his gaze, moving along the first line of cribs, stopped at the one just left of center, where its infant oc-

cupant appeared to be sitting boldly upright,\* shaking its small pudgy fist at the window. The baby's face was quite red, and its tiny eyes glittered with a furious intelligence that was distinctly upsetting. If Lester's senses had not failed him, this was the originator of the angry voice.

"And what are you nosing around for, stupid?" the baby asked hotly, darting a swift glance in his direction. "I suppose you have never seen a baby before? How would you like it if every time you looked up from your bed you were faced with a lot of dough-faced, low-grade morons gaping at you through a plate glass window? Talk about goldfish!"

For a moment Lester was too startled to move. Then, laggingly, his eyes moved to the name on the crib, and he stiffened sharply. The name, plain as a day in May, was *Holmes!*

"Wha—!" Lester said, unable to grasp the situation or any part of it. He whirled about to the doctors and found them in hasty retreat toward a doorway at the far end of the room.

"Hey!" Lester yelled and took out after them.

He raced along in their wake down a narrow hallway and through another door, into a small room full of electric sterilizers. Instantly upon arrival, the doctors went



quickly to the business of donning masks.

"Now just look here!" Lester cried, but the doctors were already in retreat toward an inner door with a glass port-hole through which could be seen the nursery. Lester shoved after them, but was held back.

"You can't come in without a mask," one of the doctors told him, then slammed the door in his face.

"I'm getting sore!" Lester said. He swung about, found a discarded mask lying on a white porcelain-ed table and slipped it on. Adjusting the strap, he hastened into the nursery.

He was greeted by a deafening din as he shoved through the door. Thirty odd babies, suddenly roused, had taken up the cry in shrill discord. Intermingled with this was the disgruntled rumblings of the doctors and the outraged mouthings of the truculent baby.

"Well, high time!" the infant yelled. "Get me out of this Bedlam before I lose my temper! How do you expect anyone to get any rest in a room full of howling brats!"

"Shut off that loudspeaker!" one of the doctors yelled, and a colleague rushed to a switch on the wall.

**L**ESTER wedged himself determinedly into the fast-clos-

ing knot around the crib. He shoved his face through an opening between two white-clad shoulders and looked up at the doctor across from him.

"How is he doing that?" he asked.

The infant in the crib looked up at him wearily. "Another one," he commented. "That makes seven. Seven come eleven and not a brain in the lot. What do I have to do to get a private room in this butcher shop? Clear out, you underlings, and send me the manager!"

"You're going to get a private room!" the doctor across from Lester said shortly. "You're going to get one if I have to build it myself." He scooped the infant up in his arms.

"Well," the baby said, falling back importantly into the crook of the doctor's arm, "that's more like it."

Again straggling after the doctors, Lester followed them from the nursery, through the outer room, down the hallway and into a room marked *Private*. There the baby was placed on an adult-sized bed, where it sat up majestically against the pillow and watched with a jaundiced eye the unmasking of those assembled.

"The human race," he commented, "is certainly not an attractive one. You jokers make up

as ugly a crew as ever blotted the horizons of hell. Not to mention that nurse you sent me. What a horror that one was!"

"She quit the hospital, you'll be delighted to know," the doctor said, bristling.

"And thereby provided the medical profession its greatest single advance in years," the infant retorted blandly.

"You didn't have to insult her," the doctor said.

"Somebody had to," the baby said, the absolute soul of reason. "No one with a face like that could go without insult much longer."

The doctor opened his mouth to reply, then glanced around uneasily at the others. "It's ridiculous, arguing with a mere infant like this," he murmured. "I feel like a fool."

"Don't be alarmed," the baby said mildly. "You also look like a fool. And I think that clears up your status most conclusively."

"Is he really doing that?" Lester breathed incredulously. "Isn't it just some sort of a trick or something?"

The baby shot him a quick glance. "Who's that?" he asked.

"Your father," the doctor said bitterly. "Heaven help him."

"That!" the baby said disbelievingly pointing a finger at Lester. "Good grief!" He eyed Les-

ter more closely and with an evident lack of satisfaction. He shrugged fatalistically. "Well, as long as you're here, there's a little matter I want straightened out. I happen to know that you and your wife—my mother, I suppose—are planning to name me Frederick Lester Holmes. I've thought it over and decided I can't permit it. The name is entirely too commonplace. I wish to be called Anstruther Pierpont Holmes, which is more consistent with the position which I mean to attain in life." He subjected Lester to another lengthy and critical stare. "Since you are my father, you may refer to me as A. P., so as to achieve an absolute economy of time spent in communication between us."

Lester clutched blindly at the foot of the bed in an attempt to maintain his equilibrium; suddenly he felt as though his knees had been set on swivels. The room appeared to be leaping about with a will of its own.

"Grab him!" a voice yelled close by. "He's going into shock!"

FIVE days later, Lester sat in the corner of the hospital room, maintaining a morbid silence while the nurse finished packing Ginny's bag. Ginny dressed now and looking pretty, though somewhat drawn, sat in a wheel chair with the infant A. P. held ginger-

ly, as one might hold a small A Bomb, in her lap. All of them watched tensely as the nurse snapped the catch on the bag and left the room. The instant she was gone, Lester was on his feet. He approached the wheel chair and levelled a warning finger under A. P.'s negligible nose.

"I don't know how the newspapers got wind of this," he said, "but I definitely suspect you. The hospital promised to keep it quiet. If any of those reporters get to you, just keep your big mouth shut. Maybe you want to be a side show attraction, but your mother and I don't!"

"Nuts," the baby said briefly.

Lester raised his glance to Ginny. "And if they ask you anything, just don't answer. And try not to cry."

"Oh, Lester!" Ginny said tearfully. "What will the neighbors think? They'll say we're not normal, and that he's a—"

"A monster," Lester supplied. "And they'll be right."

"You don't need to talk about me as though I weren't here," A. P. said evenly. "I can hear every word you're saying."

"Can't we just stay here in the hospital?" Ginny pleaded. "Just a few more days?"

"They won't have him," Lester said, casting A. P. an accusing glance. "He's tried to reorganize

the entire hospital. Three nurses, two doctors and five internes have given up the professor, and six patients stole wheel chairs and left without notice. They've given us a deadline until noon to get him off the premises."

"Inefficiency," A. P. said tersely. "Everywhere you look, inefficiency. It's appalling."

"And so are you!" Lester snapped.

"My father!" the infant said, rolling his eyes to the ceiling. "What irony!"

At this moment the nurse returned and the unhappy trio fell into a forced silence.

"The reporters," the nurse said uneasily, "they've gotter into the hallway somehow." She followed Lester's apprehensive gaze to the baby. "They want an interview—with all three of you."

Lester sighed deeply. "Oh, well," he said, and taking hold of the wheel chair he shoved it forward.

The crush began at the door. A dozen reporters, at the first glimpse of the wheel chair, crowded toward it. A red-faced young man with a touseled crop of black hair stuck his face aggressively down next to A. P.'s.

"What do you think of the political situation, kid?" he yelled.

The little company froze, and there was an instantaneous hush. Lester exchanged a glance of

speechless horror with Ginny as their infant son observed his inquisitor with a scathing stare and parted his cherubic lips.

"Goo," A. P. said with flat disgust. "Goo, goo, goo!"

THE ensuing week passed tortuously. It was unthinkable, of course, that there should be a nurse — or any outsider for that matter — in the house during Ginny's recuperation. Therefore, it was necessary for Lester to take a leave of absence from the bank and remain at home. As a substitute angel of mercy, however, Lester found himself singularly lacking in certain basic qualities; he was constantly beset with an alarming impulse to do violence to the weak and helpless. On the seventh day he cracked.

"I don't care!" he cried storming into Ginny's bedroom. "I don't care if he is my son! I'm darned if I'll take any more guff off of him!" He banged a half-empty feeding bottle down on the bureau. "Everything I do is wrong! I give him his formula and he gives me a dissertation on how to prepare lobsters Newberg! I can't stand any more of it!"

Ginny accepted this tirade from her bed with distressed uncertainty. "I know, dear," she said gently. "Last time I was up I went in to see him, and he told me

I was wearing the wrong shades of lipstick, powder and rouge, and that I ought to comb my hair away from my face if I want to resemble anything human at all."

"And he wants to rebuild the house!" Lester fumed. "He says it's non-functional! It's like living with Hitler, I tell you!"

"Now, dear," Ginny said softly. "We wanted a son."

"A son, yes," Lester said, "but not a pea-sized Einstein." He held out a hand. "What are we going to do, Gin? We can't keep him hidden away forever. Mrs. Hilliard from next door was over again this morning. I've run out of excuses."

"Oh, don't let *her* in!" Ginny said. "With that wart on her nose I can't imagine what he'd say to her! And she'd blab it all over town. The newspaper people would be after us again. We'd be an object of curiosity all over the world!"

Lester sagged into the chair in the corner. "We'd never have another moment's privacy." He closed his eyes wearily. "I feel like passing out arsenic instead of cigars."

"We'll just have to keep him hidden as long as we can," Ginny said hopelessly. "If anyone sees him we'll have to explain that he learned to talk prematurely."

"We'll never get away with it," Lester said. "His language is too darned premature."

"I don't know why this had to happen to us," Ginny lamented. "It couldn't have come from my side of the family. We've none of us ever been very bright."

Lester looked around at her sharply. "Neither have we," he said.

"Then where did it come from?" Ginny asked.

"Not from heaven," Lester said firmly. "That's certain."

THE second week passed, and Ginny recovered sufficiently to be up and about. With apprehension, she relieved Lester of his duties with A. P. Her worst fears, she learned, had not been unfounded.

"He wants the stock reports," she reported to Lester in the kitchen. "Did you give him that copy of Forever Amber?"

"I did," Lester said dully.

"But why, for heaven's sake?"

"To keep his mind off the house," Lester said. "He's got it all redesigned. Refinanced, too. In his head."

"He's got so many things in his head," Ginny said. "It's terrifying. I'll never get used to it."

"Don't worry about it," Lester said. "We won't be seeing much of him as soon as he learns to walk. He explained it all to me. He's going into some sort of business that will take him into higher

circles. I think he's planning to be a financial shyster of some sort."

Ginny dropped into the chair opposite him and gazed at him dimly from across the table. "I thought it was going to be so nice to be a mother, to have something that depended on me and looked up to me."

"I know," Lester said. "We've just got to face it, though, A. P. is less a child than we are. He's a full grown adult and he doesn't intend to indulge us by pretending to be a baby. I know it's impossible, but . . ."

Both of them stiffened as a knock sounded sharply at the back door.

"Mrs. Hilliard!" Ginny hissed. "Don't answer!"

"Don't worry," Lester said.

The room filled with silence as both of them sat absolutely quiet. There was a second knock, more insistent this time. As it died out, the silence fell again. Then it shattered.

"Hey, you two!" A. F.'s penetrating voice yelled from the nursery. "Get on the ball with that reenforced feeding! I'll never grow up if you're going to starve me to death!"

"Oh, Lord!" Lester groaned. Instantly there was a third knock that fairly rattled the hinges. "You get rid of her. I'll take him

the bottle."

"And make sure you have the formula I worked out!" the voice from the nursery commanded. "I don't want to waste any more time in this wicker cage than I have to!"

When Lester returned to the kitchen he found, with a thrill of horror, that Mrs. Hilliard, a steely glint in her eyes, had forced her way inside. She was a solid woman with a square figure, a square face and undoubtedly a square heart to match, which Lester was certain lay in her bosom like a small granite cornerstone. The wart on her nose was twitching with resolution. Ginny stood, cowed, beside the open door.

"Ginny Holmes," Mrs. Hilliard was saying, "we've been friends ever since you moved here. I was the first one inside your door to welcome you to the neighborhood, and I resent being treated like a stranger now. After all, I only want to help out."

"But, Mrs. Hilliard . . ." Ginny tried to say.

"I know you don't want me to see the baby," Mrs. Hilliard went on. "You certainly made that plain enough. And although I don't know why, I can guess. Everyone in the neighborhood has guessed by now."

"Why what do you mean, Mrs. Hilliard?"

"It happened to a cousin of mine; the child was hopelessly malformed. But it's no reflection on you, dear. It's just one of nature's tragedies, and you have to learn to accept it gracefully."

"But, Mrs. Hilliard!" Ginny gasped, her eyes wide with astonishment, "it's nothing like that!"

"And you'll find that everyone in the block is just as sympathetic as I am. We've all wanted to tell you how sorry we are, but if you won't admit it, or even let us see the child . . ."

Lester drew himself up in the doorway. "Mrs. Hilliard," he said firmly, and the woman turned, giving him a square, hard look. "Mrs. Hilliard, please put your prying mind at rest. If you want to give the neighborhood a report on our baby, then all right!" His face was fast becoming a dangerous red. "Just step this way!"

"Lester!" Ginny cried.

But Lester was beyond caution. "We call the baby A. P.," he said, "but you may address him as Mr. Holmes." Mrs. Hilliard cast him a curious glance. "Come right along, Mrs. Hilliard!"

"Well . . ." Mrs. Hilliard said, then selfrighteously started after him down the hall.

AS they entered, A. P. was busy reading, the book propped up against the side of his crib. His

bottle hung rakishly from the corner of his mouth, balanced across his shoulder. At the sight of the approaching trio, he looked around and frowned. Mrs. Hilliard stopped short as the baby pointed a chubby finger in her direction.

"Who," A. P. asked in measured tones, "is that? Or should I say 'what is that?'"

Mrs. Hilliard made a small wheezing sound and looked around uncertainly at Ginny.

"This is our neighbor," Lester said recklessly. "Mrs. Hilliard."

"Well, why come dragging her in here?" A. P. asked. "Surely it can't be milking time already." He regarded Mrs. Hilliard more closely. "She's certainly nothing to inflict on a mere infant."

"Well!" Mrs. Hilliard managed to wheeze.

"Quiet, wart nozzle," A. P. said imperiously. "You have one of those voices that grate on my nerves."

Mrs. Hilliard whirled on Lester. "Lester Holmes! Is this some sort of joke?"

"If it is," A. P. said, "it's entirely on you, madam. How any woman could get that bowlegged in a mere sixty years is quite beyond me."

"Sixty years!" Mrs. Hilliard cried. "Bowlegged! Ginny Holmes . . ."

"Oh, shut up," A. P. said disgustedly. "Get out of here and let me read. I'm just at the part where she locks him into her bedroom and slips the key down the front of her dress."

"Well!" Mrs. Hilliard snorted. "I certainly will get out of here! And I'll never set foot in this house again."

"That'll be a great relief to the foundations," A. P. observed affably and returned to his book and bottle.

Ginny cast Lester a glance of pure fury, then turned away. "Mrs. Hilliard!" she cried. But already that outraged lady was down the hall and making rapid time toward the back door. Ginny ran after her. "Mrs. Hilliard!"

"Let her go!" Lester called out, following along the hall. "Forget it."

In the kitchen, Ginny turned on him, a nasty glint in her eyes. "There!" she said hysterically. "Now, you've done it! She'll tell everyone!"

"No one will believe her," Lester said defensively. "They'll just think she's gone off her nut."

"They'll come here!" Ginny cried. "The reporters and everyone! I don't want to be known as the mother of the most insulting baby in the world!"

"Neither do I!" Lester said distractedly. "I mean I don't want

to be known as the father!"

"What!" Ginny gasped, her eyes growing wide. "You mean you're going to tell everyone you're not the father?"

"Now, I didn't say that!" Lester yelled. "I only meant that . . ."

"I wouldn't put it past you!" Ginny said furiously. "Put all the blame on me. I can certainly see where that child got his evil disposition! Your whole family has always been shift! I should have known!"

"Shift!" Lester flared. "My family, shift! What about your brother, Delmar? Did you ever bake him a cake with a file in it, like he asked you to?"

"You leave my family out of this! You know it was an accident tha Delmer got arrested!"

"Hah!" Lester said. "That's a hot one, that is! And you call my family shift. At least they're not locked up."

"But that doesn't mean that they shouldn't be!" Ginny hollered. "That crazy father of yours!"

"Not to mention that witch you call 'mother!'"

"I guess she's got your number all right!"

"I'm warning you, Ginny, I can't stand much more. I'm under too much of a strain!"

"You're under a strain!" Ginny laughed wildly. "Just who had that baby. I'd like to know?"

"You did!" Lester shot back. "And there's your answer to what's wrong with him. I should have married Fanny Gantner. My father always said so, and he knew women!"

"I'll say he did! He knew all the women in town!" Suddenly Ginny began to cry. "So that's what you're always thinking when you look at me like that! Fanny Gantner! Well!" Suddenly she spun around and ran from the room.

Lester sank into the chair at the kitchen table and ran a trembling hand over his face. "It's too much," he muttered. "It's too much for human flesh and bone to stand." He put his arms down on the table and leaned forward, resting his head on the backs of his hands. There was a momentary stillness which was almost instantly broken by a series of racking sobs from the bedroom. Then there was the sound of A. P.'s shrill voice.

"Rot!" the infant howled. "Drivel!" There was the sound of a book dropping to the floor. "I'm sick of this paltry fiction. If you two cases of arrested development can bestir yourselves from your childish bickerings, one of you go out and get me the financial news!"

Lester, even with his eyes closed, suddenly saw a great searing flash. He jerked back in his chair, got up and marched rigidly to the back



door. Outside, he walked down the drive to the garage, got into the car and slammed the door.

It was more than too much. Obviously his wife considered him shifty and unreliable, and his child thought of him only as a blithering ninny only to be ordered about. Well, in that case, he knew what to do about it. He started the car, backed down the drive and started down the street.

THE Hickentlope Hotel was the sort of establishment where the management was not chary of guests without luggage. Lester sat in one of the Hickentlope's uninspiring rooms, stared at the puce colored walls and thought dark thoughts, until it was time to turn out the lights, stare at the darkened walls and think puce thoughts.

He blamed himself somewhat for having left Ginny alone when she'd only barely risen from her sick bed, but swift on the heels of this recrimination came the thought that if she wasn't able to manage properly, A. P. would be only too happy to tell her how. Besides, she could always telephone her mother, even though Mrs. Feeney had sworn, on the day of their wedding, never to enter her daughter's house. Finally, Lester began to speculate on the probable consequences should A. P.

and Mrs. Feeney be brought together under the same roof and, with the picture of this happy disaster in mind, he eventually dozed off.

In the morning, after the first barber's shave he had ever experienced, Lester made his way to the bank. He was dreary-eyed and low in his mind, but he managed to withstand the ironical congratulations of his co-workers with a fixed and aching grin. When Mr. Painter, the bank manager, asked him bluffly about the new heir, he had half a notion to tell him just to see the silly smile wilt from his vapid face.

Lester retired soberly to his window, arranged his cash drawer and got down to business. It was nearly noon, in the midst of the deposits of a neighborhood bakery shop, that Miss Sward, Mr. Painter's secretary, appeared at his shoulder to tell him that his wife was on the telephone and wished to speak to him on a matter of urgency.

With a feeling of triumph that Ginny had capitulated so rapidly and so easily, he completed the bakery's deposits, closed his window and made his way back to the office and the telephone. Keeping his tone distant but nonetheless magnanimous, he said hello.

"Lester!" Ginny's voice came tartly over the wire, "Who are all

those people?"

This was not precisely the approach Lester had anticipated. For a moment he was taken aback.

"What people?" he asked finally.

"You know very well what people! All those people at home. Who are they, Lester?"

Lester felt a chill crawl up his spine. "At home?" he said. "What home?"

"It's no use playing dumb," Ginny snapped. "At our home."

"But aren't you there?" Lester asked. "I don't understand."

"Of course I'm not!" Ginny said hotly. "You know I'm not. I left yesterday when you went out to get A. P. the financial news. Now, stop hedging and . . ."

"But I didn't get the financial news," Lester said. "I went to a hotel last night."

"What!"

"Where are you?"

"I'm at mother's! Lester, you mean you haven't been home all night?"

"No. Haven't you?"

"I told you. I'm at mother's! Oh, Lester! who are all those people?"

"What people? Ginny, tell me what you're talking about!"

"We've got to get over there right away!" Ginny said shrilly. "I called the house just a little while ago — mother insisted, be-

cause of the baby—and this woman with a terribly sexy voice answered. She wanted to know with whom I wished to speak, and I could hear a lot of people talking—all sorts of people! Oh, Lester!"

"Oh, Lord!" Lester said. "I'll get over there right away. It might be the police!"

"They'll arrest us for child neglect, and everyone will know about it! Come by mother's and pick me up, Lester! Hurry!"

"Do I have to face your mother at a time like this?"

"I'll wait for you outside—on the sidewalk! Hurry, Lester, please!"

"All right!" Lester said frantically and hung up.

TRUE to her word, Ginny, her overnight case in her hand, was waiting on the sidewalk when Lester pulled up at the curb. But so was her mother. Mrs. Feeney was a thin-nosed woman with high cheek bones and a tongue as swift and venomous as an adder's. For the moment, her naturally sallow complexion had become quite ruddy. Lester, pulling up the brake, closed his eyes briefly to steel himself. Mrs. Feeney jutted her head through the window.

"Hello, Mrs. Feeney," Lester said, opening his eyes reluctantly.

"Lester Holmes!" Mrs. Feeney screeched. "You ought to be

horse whipped! Only a no good skunk like you would even think of deserting his wife and child like this! Only a low-down rat . . ."

"Mother!" Ginny cried, shoving Mrs. Feeney desperately back and pulling the door open. "Please, mother! There isn't time to bawl Lester out—not now!"

"I'm going to have my say!" Mrs. Feeney snarled determinedly. "I don't care!"

"Write me a letter!" Lester said, taking Ginny's arm and drawing her into the seat. "Just keep it clean enough to go through the mails!"

"Why you . . ." Mrs. Feeney yelped, clawing at the door. "You—viper! Come back here!"

But Lester had already slammed the door and pressed down on the gas. The coupe shot ahead down the street.

"Oh, Lester!" Ginny wailed, putting her case down on the floor. "Who would all those people be?"

"I don't know," Lester said worriedly. "Whoever they are, I'll bet Mrs. Hilliard had something to do with it. I only hope it's not the authorities!"

THE street and the drive were filled with cars when they arrived, and they were forced to park around on the other side of the block. Lester helped Ginny out of the car and together they hur-

ried back to the house.

The lawn was practically covered with sober-looking gentlemen who stood about in knots, conversing in subdued voices. A small line had formed at the front door. Lester led the way through the crowd and up the steps to the door. He found himself faced by a slick-haired young man who headed the line.

"Not so fast there, pal," the young man said. "You've got to wait your turn around here. I'm next."

Ginny looked at the young man incredulously. "Next for what?" she asked.

"I'm from the Wee-wheat Cereal Company," the young man said. "I got a tip on this wonder brat, and the boss sent me over to get an endorsement and a picture."

Lester cast him a swift, unfriendly glance and turned aggressively to the door. He grasped the knob and shoved it open, drawing Ginny inside after him. They were only a step inside the living room, however, before they were greeted by a dark, sleek woman in a tailored black suit and jeweled glasses. She observed them with cool grey eyes, and she was carrying a pad and pencil.

"Yes?" she enquired in a tone that brooked no nonsense.

"What are all these people doing here?" Lester demanded angrily.

ly. "Who are they?"

The woman's gaze moved unconcernedly to the opening in the door and the men standing outside on the lawn. "Some of them," she announced, "are financiers and corporation lawyers, I believe. Others are advertising men and reporters. There are some scientists, too, and one minister." She smiled noncommittally. "If you would like to place your name on the list I can fit you in three days from now. That will be Friday afternoon at precisely two twenty-three. If you'll just state your name and the nature of your business . . ."

"The nature of my business!" Lester said. "What's going on here?"

"Matters of considerable importance," the woman said with sudden severity. "Now, if you've something you wish to take up with A. P. . . ."

"I certainly have!" Lester said. "I have a lot of things to take up with A. P. I'm his father!" He turned to Ginny. "Close the door."

"Yes," Ginny said. She closed the door quickly and turned back. "And I'm A. P.'s mother."

"Oh," the woman said. For a moment she seemed uncertain as to just which attitude in her repertoire to assume. She made a small motion with her hand. "If you'll just wait here, I'll see if I can get

you in."

"You wait here!" Lester said with sudden heat. "I'll get myself in. You just bet your garters I will!"

"Yes!" Ginny said and followed after Lester as he turned toward the hallway.

Crossing the room, they passed a young girl in a starched white blouse, sitting at the dining table busily typing names and addresses on a large stack of envelopes. She glanced up at them with no change of expression and went on working.

"Lester," Ginny said, touching Lester's sleeve, "I just want you to know that I'm not mad any more. Not at you."

"Me either," Lester said hastily and forged ahead.

At the door to the hallway, they were forced to give way to a lush and shapely blonde with very red lips. The girl wore a tight nurse's uniform and carried a bottle in her hand. She hustled past them and disappeared into the kitchen. They turned toward the nursery from which was coming the sound of many voices, underscored with a curious clicking noise.

ARRIVING at the nursery they stopped short at the threshold. The room was fairly glutted with people, all talking and moving about at the same time. In the

far corner was a ticker tape machine, which accounted for the frenetic clicking sound. In the center of all this activity, A. P. looked on from his crib with an expression of enormous satisfaction. Somewhere a telephone rang and, except for the clicking of the machine, the room fell magically silent. A young man with thick-rimmed spectacles produced the phone from the floor, answered it, then brought it forward to A. P.'s crib.

"For you, A. P.," he said briskly. "Brandish out on the Coast."

A. P. nodded sagely and gave his attention to the phone. He listened briefly, pursing his lips.

"Now, just a minute there, Hank," he broke in, "you should be the last one to question my judgment after this morning. Central Mines paid off, didn't they? You're darned right they did, and handsomely, too. Now, I'm telling you, and I'm not going to repeat myself—put your gains on Spartan Steel. And remember, I'm in for twenty per cent for the tip. That's right. Goodbye."

He nodded to the young man who promptly removed the phone from his ear and took it away. At the doorway, Lester stepped resolutely into the room.

"Now, just a second!" he said loudly. "What do all you people think you're doing in my house?"

All eyes swiveled in his direction. A. P. looked around and frowned slightly, as might an ancient warrior who had discovered that he had been riveted into his armor with a gnat.

"Oh, so you're back," he said mildly.

"How did all these people get in here?" Lester demanded.

"Well," A. P. said without rancor, "when I discovered I'd been abandoned, I began to yell and, one by one, they began to show up."

"But who are they?" Ginny asked weakly.

"My staff," A. P. said grandly. "Variously — there's no need for names — they are my private secretary, my social secretary, my publicist, my business manager, my biographer, my Washington representative, my personal news compiler and my lawyer. You no doubt ran into my receptionist, my typist, my clerk and my dietician on your way in."

"We missed your clerk," Lester said shortly. "Just what do you and your staff think you're up to?"

"It's not what we think we're up to," A. P. said smoothly, "it's what we *are* up to. Already, since just this morning, I have become the financial advisor to the top ten industrialists in the nation, and the President. By evening, I expect I will also be the world's

foremost news analyst, financier and political manipulator. I am even considering an offer to appear in motion pictures, though I'm inclined to regard any venture in the entertainment field as a trifle facetious for someone who expects to take over the management of the nation — and perhaps even the world."

"A dictator!" Ginny cried thinly. "He's turned into a dictator!"

"Oh, not quite yet," A. P. said. "That takes a little time—a few weeks, anyway."

"No!" Lester gasped.

"No?" A. P. enquired. "What do you mean, no?"

"You can't do this," Lester said. "It isn't right. I won't be the father of a dictator."

A. P. SIGHED patiently. "I imagined you'd take some such prosaic attitude," he murmured. "However, you'll get used to it in time. Besides, I might point out that you're in no position to object. I can get you on a child abandonment charge any time I want to." He smiled significantly. "And now that you're here, it's just as well. I need a little ready security to balance out a deal I'm putting through. I'd be much obliged if you'd just sign over a deed to me for the house and the car. It won't come to much, I know, but it'll see me

through."

"What!" Lester cried.

"Of course you'll have to sign them into the name of my business manager since I'm under age," A. P. explained, "but it will all be in good order."

"Now, look here, you!" Lester said. "Your mother and I have scrimped and saved for these things, and . . ."

"Oh, don't worry," A. P. broke in. "You'll get yours. In fact I mean to retire you and mother within the next few days with a very tidy little allowance. I'm picking up a farm in Connecticut on a foreclosure, and you and mother can move up there—rent free—where you won't worry so much. So you see . . ."

The young man with the glasses stepped forward, a legal document extended in his hand.

Lester backed away. "I won't do it!" he said. "I won't sign anything!"

A shocked silence fell over the room. It was as though a comrade had stepped up to Malenkov and politely explained that he refused to share his potato crop with the proletariat. A. P. narrowed his eyes thoughtfully.

"In that case," he said slowly, "I suppose I will have to report you to the authorities for child neglect. You realize, of course, there will be unprecedented public-

ity. By noon tomorrow I expect to have world-wide coverage. You will be social lepers wherever you go."

"Oh dear!" Ginny whimpered. "What'll we do, Lester?"

"You have exactly thirty seconds to make up your mind," A. P. said. "I have to get on with business."

AT this tense moment, the uniformed blonde entered the room with a fresh bottle in her hand. She proceeded to the crib and leaned down to A. P.

"Your new formula, sir," she said throatily.

Up to this point, Ginny had been a mere observer, looking on with dazed bewilderment. Now, however, at the sight of the sultry blonde, a glint that looked like militant and usurped maternalism flared in her eyes; something deep and primitive came swiftly to the surface. With a small, angry cry she strode forward and snatched the bottle from the blonde's hand.

"At least I can feed my own baby!" she cried, "even if he is a monster!" Leaning down to the crib, she picked A. P. up and settled him into the crook of her arm. "This is a lot of nonsense! All of it!"

"Put me down!" A. P. commanded with displaced dignity. "Let go of me!"

The blonde bristled with professional outrage. "Give me that child!" she snapped. She took hold of A. P.'s arm. "I'm being paid a thousand dollars a month to administer his feedings, and I'm going to earn my money!"

"You're overpaid!" Ginny said hotly, hugging A. P. to herself. "A thousand dollars to feed a baby!"

"Put me down!" A. P. wheezed as the nurse made another grab for him. "Both of you!"

The telephone rang sharply, and the young man ran to it.

"You be quiet!" Ginny told A. P. sternly. "Don't talk back to your mother!"

"That's right!" Lester said, striding forward. "Or your father, either!"

"I'll report you!" A. P. yelled. "I'll tell the authorities!"

The nurse pulled at A. P. violently. "Give him to me!" she cried.

"Put me down this instant!" A. P. insisted. "I demand it!"

Lester shook a finger under the nurse's nose. "You let go of him!" he thundered. He took hold of A. P.'s chubby leg. "He's ours!"

The young man darted forward frantically with the phone. "It's Evans of Tantamount Publications!" he yelled above the uproar. He grasped A. P.'s head and jammed it next to the receiver. "He's

ready to close the deal!"

"Put me down!" A. P. shrieked into the phone. "Let go of me, all of you!"

"Give him back!" Ginny hissed at the nurse. "You get out of my house!"

"He's my responsibility, I guess," the nurse shot back, pulling harder. "I'm getting paid for this!"

"Not to rip my leg off, you're not!" A. P. screamed.

"Evans wants an answer, A. P.!" The young man hollered. "Say something!"

WHILE this murky atmosphere seethed and thickened inside the nursery, the sun shone brightly outside, and the distant heavens were blue. They were blue, that is, except to a single and very remote blemish. In the timeless and vaped regions of Heaven's own dispatching department there lay a distinct cloudiness that emanated mainly from the dismayed faces of those two enterprising and well-intentioned angels, Mac and Haywood.

"Good grief, Haywood!" Mac gasped, gazing down hauntedly through the mists of time, "they're yankin' the little bugger apart! It's disgraceful!"

"Yes, I know," Haywood said worriedly. "The whole affair is disgraceful. I shudder to think

what will happen to us when it comes to light in the higher echelons."

"We only wanted to do something nice," Mac said sadly. "How was we to know the kid was going to be a stinkin' genius?"

"The unknown element," Haywood sighed heavily. "The Higher Source. Even angels can be wrong when they take authority into their own hands."

"Who'd have thought a little baby could turn out to be such a rat?"

"He's not a rat," Haywood said. "It's just that too much knowledge was given to him all at once and he didn't know how to use it properly. It only proves again that humans can only learn through experience. We've made a tragic mistake, Mac."

"And it's getting tragic-er by the minute," Mac said hollowly. "If that kid gets hold of the world . . . What'll they do to us, Haywood?"

"I hesitate to even put it into words," Haywood murmured.

"The way that kid's organized," Mac said, "he's a cinch to be a world-wide scandal by sunset. Ain't there nothing we can do to stop it?"

"I've been trying to think of something," Haywood said.

Mac looked at him hopefully. "Give it everything you've got,



Haywood," he said. "You've got the brains."

Slowly, Haywood began to drum his fingers on a nearby cloud bank . . .

AT the focal point of this heavenly concern, A. P. finally managed to raise his voice above the angry din that raged about him. His small voice piped like a penny whistle.

"Stop clutching at me!" he shrieked. "My diaper is coming loose!"

The clutching however, did not stop, nor did the yanking, hauling, and pulling. Slowly, the diaper slithered loose from A. P.'s pudgy mid-section and dropped to the floor. The future dictator of the world blushed furiously.

"Stop!" he yelled. "For heaven's sake!"

After a moment, the fact that they had literally snatched the poor infant naked finally penetrated the minds of the struggling group. There was a sudden shame-faced silence.

"Well!" A. P. said indignantly, "the least you could do is turn me over. Now, unhand me, the lot of you, before I really lose my temper!"

Under this threat, all concerned acted almost as though under a hypnotic command. Simultaneously, everyone withdrew their sup-

port. All hands, so to speak, returned from active combat. The obvious, though unforeseen, result followed swiftly and shockingly; A. P. dropped to the floor, meeting its polished surface with the back of his head and a dull, ominous thud.

There was a sudden communal gasp, then horrified silence. Ginny was the first to recover her voice.

"He's dropped!" she said in a ghastly whisper. "On his head!"

"He told us to let go of him," the nurse said.

"He didn't mean all of us," a distinguished grey-haired gentleman said. "I should have realized it."

"It was as though my hand was taken away," Lester said wonderingly.

Ginny stooped down and took A. P. gently in her arms. As she straightened, the small form stirred and opened his eyes.

"He's all right, isn't he?" a voice asked hopefully.

Slowly, A. P.'s head lolled heavily to the side. In his eyes there was a totally new expression, or, rather, a new lack of expression. The young man with the glasses held the telephone forward.

"Evans is still waiting for an answer, A. P.," he said.

A. P.'s gaze seemed to penetrate the telephone and go beyond it. His lips parted with a slack tooth-

lessness that had not before been apparent. Suddenly he began to cry, and his voice raised in a thin, distinctly babyish howl.

"Oh, no!" the young man whispered, and the telephone slowly slipped from his hand.

SIX years later, in another house and another suburb, where there was no Mrs. Hilliard next door and their child was known merely as 'little Freddie Holmes,' Lester and Ginny lived in quiet obscurity. If there were those in the world who remembered the formidable A. P. they never mentioned it publicly, presumably loathe to admit that they had ever placed themselves at the command of a mere infant. Now, shifting uneasily in his chair, Lester looked up worriedly as Ginny returned from the hallway. He watched as she moved toward him and placed a hand gently on his shoulder.

"It's all right," Ginny said.

"He's only listening to the music on the radio."

"That's good," Lester sighed. "He can't learn much from that."

"We're both far too edgy about Freddie, dear," Ginny said. "After all, he really hasn't shown any signs of dominating — not really since the beginning."

"I know," Lester said, "but what about this?" He held up the offending class paper. "I still think this tendency to get 'excellents' is dangerous."

"I know, dear," Ginny said, "but the doctors all said he was perfectly normal for a child of his intelligence." She patted his shoulder consolingly. "He's just bright, that's all, and we mustn't worry about it so much."

Lester nodded wearily. "I suppose not," he said. With a sigh, he dropped the paper to the floor.

Outside, in the dark and distant heavens, ever so faintly, the sigh was echoed in duplicate.

THE END



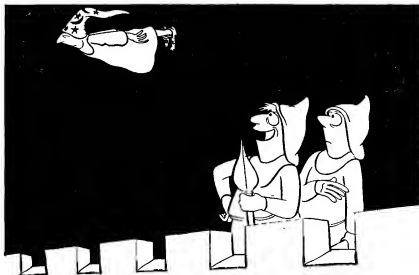
## ★ *More Speed Necessary!* ★

N<sub>A</sub>NAVY rocket technicians have pushed the speed of experimental Viking rockets to five thousand miles per hour! This is fifteen hundred miles an hour better than the V-2's. It sounds impressive and it makes space travel seem much nearer—that is, until you recall that escape velocity, the speed necessary for an object to leave the Earth, is *twenty-five* thousand miles per hour!

Fortunately that isn't cause for

despair. It is now realized that with chemical fuels escape velocity is simply not attainable—in one step that is. Cut it any way you like, there is only one answer—the step rocket, a rocket within a rocket and maybe still another.

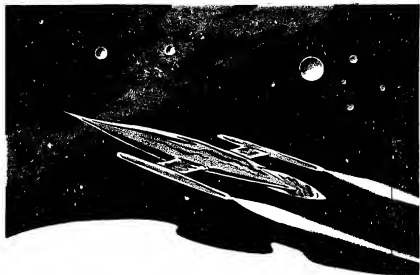
What is encouraging is the stepped-up speed. Each time the speed is pushed up just a thousand miles an hour, space travel, the satellite station and the Moon journey come that much closer.



*nelhok*

"Hey, look — — a Flying Sorcerer!"





**Earth wasn't good enough once a man had a taste of deep space — and met his Ideal. Al Hall wanted to know why, so he volunteered for his —**

# TICKET TO THE STARS

*By*

*Raymond E. Banks*

**I** WAS sitting in the dining-bar of the Thousand Lights, in New York, watching Kelly as the woman walked into the bar. There was a ripple, an undercurrent of sensation. Not because of the way

she looked, not because of her dress, but because she was an Ideal. People hate Ideals. The better-looking they are the more they are hated, and this one was right on top.

I sat at a table about twelve feet from Kelly. He sat at the bar and I could see his face in the mirror. His face scowled in an expression of hate. I saw him pick up his cigarettes and make a ball of the empty package with his fist. He tried to look away; his eyes crossed mine and he didn't even recognize me.

The Ideal came up to him and slipped on the stool beside him with some word of greeting. She was human all right. Too human. She was dressed in white. Most of them dress in white. There was some gold sprinkled on her costume. It was very expensive, made of Scolarian cloth, flowing around her body. Kelly bit his lip and pulled away from the touch of her arm. It was a well-rounded arm, white and perfect in the soft lights of the bar. The face was pleasant with a youthful glow. Her red hair was soft enough to halo, strong enough to fall a bit this way and that as she turned. She had a small nose, blue Irish eyes and a smattering of freckles.

She looked a little bit like Kelly.

She went on talking. When she smiled her white teeth flashed and sparkled. Nobody from earth quite had teeth like that.

The bartender set a drink before Kelly, took the Ideal's order. She made a few comments to Kel-

ly and he dipped his face despairingly in his arms. The rest of the people in the bar went unconcernedly about their business.

"God damn it! Leave me alone!"

Kelly burst out just as the bartender served the girl's drink. Kelly took his own drink and threw it in the pretty Irish face of the redhead, whipped away from the stool and was gone. I caught a glimpse of his face as he went past and it was frightening. It was the face of a man who can never get drunk again, who can never really sleep again. You took one look at him and knew he'd been in deep space on the Stardust Overdrive, but it seemed queer to see the look on a familiar face.

My own insides felt cold. First Kelly made the moon. Then I did. Then I made Mars. Then he did. Then he went on the Stardust Overdrive . . . and came back with his Ideal . . .

KELLY'S redhead wiped the drink from her face, flushing a little. A bouncer came up and told her to leave. She gave him the look they all have. Of patience, of humor, of some exasperation. Some of her delectable red hair was soaked with the drink but she pushed it back from her eyes and got up. She gave a wistful glance at her untouched drink and

started to go. She went past my table with a flash of smooth legs. There was the faint odor of deep-space perfume. The crowd parted in distaste from her, but a couple of near-spacemen made some grinning cracks and whistled.

I followed her out.

She stood on the curbing, white and gracious, fumbling absently with her coat as I came up. She was watching the parking lot. Her eyes barely grazed me as I helped her with the coat. It was snowing but her bare arms were warm.

"Is Kelly going back?"

She smiled her thanks for the help. "Maybe."

"Would he go back if anything happened to you?"

"I don't know."

Kelly was coming now. His aircar swooped up to the curb and he opened the door for her. She got in, sliding beside him with an amused but determined look.

I pulled out my gun and leaned forward. I put the muzzle against the curving throat of the girl.

"Jim," I said, "I'll do it for you if you want."

There was a flash of fright in her face and she put her hand up to her throat, but only to ease the pressure of the gun that dug into the white flesh.

Jim stared at the girl and me and the gun.

"No, Al."

"It's no crime," I said. "They'd never convict me for killing an Ideal. Jim, this is your last chance to beat the Stardust Overdrive."

"Thanks, Al," said Kelly. "Maybe I'll be sending for you someday to help."

"Out there," I said.

"Out there," he said bitterly. "I'm leaving tomorrow."

The girl's small hands moved up and with amazing strength pushed my gun away from her throat. Her look was one of triumph, even and cool, not gloating. Almost matter-of-fact.

"Remind me to scare the hell out of you some time," she said. "We're human too, you know."

I looked down at the sitting sweep of the white-clad thighs and grunted. "Maybe."

Then I looked at Jim and saw it was check-out time. For a moment his face had the old look of swagger. Just for a second he was the old Jim.

"Keep 'em flying, boy," he said.

"Same to you, Jim."

"Maybe I'll see you out there some time, Al."

"Maybe you will, Jim," I said.

"Goodbye, Albert Hall," said the girl. The aircar zoomed away from me.

I PUT my gun away angrily. Then I caught an aircar back to

the office. On the way I did a lot of thinking. And what I thought made me even angrier. I thought about Kelly—and all the other men like him who signed on the Stardust Overdrive. They were good men, happy men—even married, some of them. But when they came back from deep space they were changed. For they always brought back an Ideal—a beautiful woman on the surface, and seemingly one who was a reflection of their every wish or desire—an Ideal. Human? As far as Earth science could determine. But science and deep space were light years apart and perhaps would always be that way for the men who went out there never talked about it much when they came back. Why? *Why!*

What made them hate it—like Kelly? And what made them *have* to return? What turned a happy man into a miserable prisoner? *Why didn't Kelly quit the Stardust Overdrive?*

When I got to the office I had made up my mind. This had been gnawing at me for a long time and it had to be settled. I had to know . . .

I filled out my request for transfer from planetary runs to deep space. Then I went to the tele and called my wife.

"Honey, you won't like what

I've just done," I told her. I could see her face take on a sudden chilled look. As if she knew . . .

"What is it, Al?" There was tenseness in her voice and I couldn't blame her a bit.

"The Stardust Overdrive." I said it quickly and then felt like a heel. But it was already too late.

"Al—no—you couldn't—"

"I signed the papers a few minutes ago. Honey, you've got to understand—I have to . . . I saw Kelly a little while ago. He's changed, and I've got to know why. He was my best friend . . ."

Her face grew hard then. "Kelly! What about me? Don't I count? I'm your wife -- remember? Or would you rather find someone to take my place—an Ideal!"

"You don't understand," I tried to tell her, but knew it was useless. She had never been in space, not even to Luna. A spaceman gets the challenge in his blood, he's got to see more, he's got to know what's beyond the solar system. Out where the Ideals come from. Sooner or later he's got to *know*.

Her face sobered suddenly and there was a desperation in her eyes. "Al, did Kelly tell you?"

I looked into the tele at her. "Tell me what?"

Her lips were tight and white. "Kelly's wife committed suicide today. She couldn't take it any



longer. It was her or—the Ideal . . . ”

I felt the shock of her words and knew what she was trying to say. *It could happen to us!*

I shook my head. “I’m sorry to hear that.” And then I felt a bitter anger. “She didn’t give him a chance to find himself. Now he’ll never quit—”

“Chance! What kind of a chance does any woman have against an Ideal? You’re blaming her?”

This wasn’t getting us anywhere and we both knew it. We stared at each other in the tele for a long silent minute. Then she said, “This will be the end for us, Al. Remember that before it’s too late . . . ”

I saw again the haunted look on Kelly’s face. The almost desperate pleading there of something I could never understand unless—

“I’m going.” I said before I could let her change my mind.

“Then there’s nothing more to say. Goodbye, Al.”

And she switched off the set on me. Her face was gone, and maybe our life together too. Just like that.

**T**HERE was a three-day orientation period before we took off. Ships on the Stardust Overdrive were operated by two-man

teams and I was assigned to a man named Radwick, an older man, who had been on the Drive before. He was as crazy as a carnival mirror. He was a semanticist and he carried around a small bag full of wooden blocks. He would set these on a table and shift them around into various positions. “I am thinking on the non-verbal level,” he told me. “I’m expressing ideas in things.”

“Maybe we’d better go over the Company manual. I got a lot to learn in only three days.”

He had white hair and a thin face and a patient smile. “Nonsense. You can’t learn that way. You learn by doing. When we get into space, I’ll teach you all you need to know about the Drive.”

I put in a complaint to the Company. “Listen,” I told the supervisor. “I don’t like the idea of teaming up with a grown-up man who plays with blocks. This boy has really lost his lid.”

The supervisor gave me the stern Company treatment. “Don’t you know that we can’t get one man in a hundred for the Drive?” he said. “We can’t afford to pick and choose. You volunteered for Stardust and you’ll have to abide by our system of operation.”

**I** WAS glad to get out of earth and into the planets. The

people of earth loved that far-off metal we brought back from the stars, called duronium plus. You could make a hundred year suit with it or you could carry an atomic pile around in your pocket in a wallet made of the stuff. It was profitable trade for the Company, but nobody wanted to have anything to do with the rest of the culture of the far-off stars. Every human who had gone out there had either not come back, or had come back with too few of his marbles. In order to get their duronium plus they had to depend on the lunatic fringe of people like Radwick, Kelly and me. People who would try anything once. People who liked to scare themselves about a thing and then go out and do it.

Radwick and I traveled on a conventional ship almost to Pluto. The small, fast Overdrive ships never came very far into the solar system. The local boys who put us on the small, red traveler serviced the ship with a touch of awe. They were plenty scared, as if afraid they would be stuck on board when we left.

There was something odd about the construction of the ship, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

"The design has passed through the minds of the Stardust beings," said Radwick, dumping his blocks on the table in the main cabin with

a rattling sound. "Earthmen provided the blueprints but these ships are built out in Sclaris. They're partly organic."

"What!"

I put my hand against one red wall and felt a warm, lifelike glow.

"Certainly, why not?" smiled Radwick, clomping a design with his blocks. He made the carbon ring to symbolize life and an energy formula to symbolize the machine. "It's only in people's minds that there is a clean break between organic and non-organic. Machines have a youth, old age and death; so do people. They are really interchangeable . . ."

"I don't like the idea of traveling in the stomach of some space-monster," I babbled. "He might get the idea to digest us."

"Stomach-bumnick," said Radwick. "This cabin could just as easily be an ear or the inside of an eye. Only the ship isn't organic in that way. It's just partly organic and partly not which may be expressed—"

He fell silent, throwing the blocks around. Suddenly I heard a bell. It consisted of four mellow tones struck at regular intervals.

"What's that?"

"Ideal sound," he said. "You'll have to get used to that too. It's another concept that we don't have

back on earth."

"What's ideal about ringing a dinner bell?"

Radwick shrugged. "It's just a discontinuity to us. The Stardust people write off our fashions in clothing as a discontinuity in reasoning that they don't understand. We must write off theirs." He smiled briefly. "You'll come to write off a great many things, young man."

I didn't tell him I thought the bells were far from ideal. They didn't have any place to come from, and for the first time I felt a fear of the unknown. Radwick sat there unperturbed trying to fashion some concept, probably of the bells, with his blocks. The earthmen finished servicing and came in to make arrangements for a rendezvous with us some months from then.

"First time out?" the Captain asked me.

"Yessir," I said, trying to look fearless.

He sighed. "Watch out for the Ideals," he said. "The first time's the hardest." His crew stood behind him looking at me like they would look at a condemned man about to take his place in the electric chair.

"Well, all happiness," he said, giving a distasteful glance at the absorbed Radwick.

"All happiness," I managed and they left us alone in space with ringing bells and the red space ship that had the disconcerting habit of sighing once in a while or shifting its wall structure in a stretch that was so human you felt like apologizing for being inside it.

WE were out in four light year space. In the big Empty between our solar system and the next. We had passed through two magnetic fields, and already I wasn't the same, but Radwick had laughed.

"Pleasure and pain," he said. "As common as an old shoe on a vacant lot. Why get coked over a little thing like that?"

It helped. It helped a lot to see him twisting and writhing on his bunk, the same as I was, only with the big red encyclopedia on his face as he pretended to read in indifference. We were in the painful magnetic field for about eight hours and I cried and cursed and prayed and laughed in horror and sweated a bucket. The reaction was worse. My frayed nerves temporarily gave out and I tried to walk through the wall of the space ship into the lining room of the Thousand Lights back in New York.

Shortly after that we hit the pleasure field. Those precious

moments lasted for the same time as the painful sensations, but after that earth seemed like a cemetery of the dead. I mewed like a stroked kitten and Radwick kept putting down his encyclopedia and laughing in goofy happiness. It was silly; it was wonderful; it made me so glad to have a human body that I wanted to cry.

These magnetic fields were behind us now and I was staring at the outside emptiness apprehensively.

"Radwick, look—" I gasped.

I had been watching a point of light in the distance. It broke on us swiftly with dazzling power. The magnitudes of light were so powerful that I had to turn the screen down to its darkest level.

Out there was what looked like the true Choir of Heaven. Rank on rank of singing, human faces, spiraling upward. Tensions of mighty humanistic fire glowed from the banked, singing faces. The hymn was obscure but it was faintly religious and very stirring. Now we were winging down a long corridor in space banked on either side by a myriad shining, dedicated human faces, pouring out glory with solemn deep-soul singing. The celestial organ effect made the whole ship vibrate and made Radwick's blocks jump on the table

like animated poker chips.

We were traveling towards a throne of golden light. In the midst of the throne was a blinding brilliance that was our goal. Now the vision closed in and the entire power of light and sound blasted into my deepest marrow. Even when I closed my eyes I could see the faces; my plugged ears yielded to the lifting sound.

Radwick was holding out a can of pork and beans towards me.

"Yesterday we had chili for supper," he shouted. "How's about beans tonight—or shall I open a canned steak?"

"Man," I yelled, pointing helplessly to the overpowering vision. "Man—"

I have never been particularly religious because it doesn't help in space. But for anybody that goes by the Book, this was Paradise in white and gold technicolor. I was ready to subscribe my salary to the cause and give up my life of sin in those seconds.

At the moment we came to the celestial throne, Radwick was scrounging in the kitchen drawer trying to find another can-opener to replace the one I'd bent.

We shot past the throne and into emptiness again. I mopped my brow and peered back, exalted by the vision but glad that I was only seeing things.

Only the Choir was still there and the throne, receding in the distance. We were on the back side of it now.

"How about that?" I croaked weakly to Radwick. "How about that?"

"Oh, it's real all right," said Radwick evenly. He took a hatchet to the can of beans and burst it open. "You can join up with the hymnals if you want. Step right outside the ship and fall into rank. Heaven by any definition. The company's lost plenty of spacemen there. Chance to become immortal, you know. I suspect that the Choir's time is infinity and past; present and future would cease to exist for you. Your body would wither away and you'd become an essence, still with a vague sense of your old name and address but totally wrapped up in the glory hallelujah and the singing. On the whole, not a bad place to spend the rest of eternity."

"Immortality," I breathed. "But—why—"

"According to the law of discontinuity," said Radwick, "the basic assumptions which make its existence impossible are wrong. In other words, we don't believe it could happen because of the known physical facts of the human body and the known facts of space. But if any step of reasoning along the

way is wrong, then it could exist. So one link in our reasoning is wrong—and it exists."

I didn't get that and he sat down with his half of the can of beans and tried to explain it to me with his semantics blocks.

I REMEMBER arguing the point of meaning and insanity with Radwick while we were passing through the layers of time. The ship would give a jerk each time we cut into a new strip in the piled-up layers. First we would be in our own time which Radwick called white time. Then we would bump over into blue time and there was a pervading sense of oddness while our eyes adjusted to a new system of angles which made everything look like a parallelogram in shape. In blue time our drinking water was a rubbery chunk of blue stuff and the solid walls of our ship shimmered into opaque, running liquid that forever eddied and whirled and yet never drained away. You could put your hand into it and feel the walls splash and splatter like water. But our hands, and indeed, our whole bodies shifted in gaseous uncertainty, both Radwick and I becoming shapeless things of floating motion in a time where liquids were solid, solids liquid, and organic matter gaseous. Together

we expanded to fill the cabin and I was fascinated by the shifts in form.

I felt the logical hammer strokes of Radwick's thinking. "You've heard ideal sound that pleases the auditory nerves. You've experienced the perfect tyranny of pain and pleasure. You've witnessed the extreme wonder of spiritual Heaven--now, my friend, feel freedom. A perfect, ideal freedom of mind and body and being that men who grub after freedom will never know."

Then we broke back into white time and everything became normal.

"No wonder they go mad out here," I breathed.

"Mad?" said Radwick. "No, not over that. The more alien a sensation, the less dangerous it is to sanity. With the unknown there is the fear symptom, perhaps, but there is no identity with the alien. The things that drive men crazy are the known, normal things which are just one beat off. Things that ought to be normal but aren't."

"Like the Ideals."

Radwick nodded his silver head. "Like the Ideals."

"How come you never met your Ideal, Radwick?"

He sighed. He played with the blocks. "I did. She was de-

stroyed."

"You killed her?"

"She was destroyed."

In the red time there were suggestive mists that whispered. Radwick watched me with amusement. I had never seen a mist-woman before, and I forgot about the Ideals when I saw these graceful, half-solid creatures that drifted past the ship. In the distance they were alien forms but as they divined our own forms and wants they shifted into reasonable facsimiles of earth-women and smiled and whispered as we drew alongside.

"Sirens," I breathed, feeling cold fear inside.

Radwick concealed a smile as one of them materialized inside the ship. She balanced on the cabin table and fell towards me, whispering sounds that almost made words. The sensation was one of almost-solid and yet a yielding that gave way to the touch. There was a wetness and a warmth with just the suggestion of glossy, mist hair, dainty-brushing, lip-kissing. She formed herself around my body and nibbled my ear and teased me to open my pores and admit her.

"I don't know how!" I gasped, almost overwhelmed by the not-quite-solidity of her.

"And never will," laughed Radwick. "You aren't sex-oriented

or you would be at the end of your run on the Overdrive right this moment, spirited away into the ideal of orgiastic perfection. The Company loses a lot of men to these mists and they go drifting in love forever, but she can't hurt you."

Then the delicious mist got mad and slapped my face and floated daintily off. Then came the jarring sensation and we were back in the daylight of our own time and heading again towards the next layer of blue time. Only by then I could marvel no more.

**I** SAW Kelly on Sclaris while they were loading the ship with duronium. In exchange the Sclarians got various earth chemicals which were used for alien purposes beyond our knowing. Sclaris was a planet of a great star; it was also a city. It was a fine city but by no means different from New York. In fact it couldn't have been New York done on an idealistic scale. The people of Sclaris, the Star-beings, were engaged in some terrific struggle which I couldn't quite understand.

"Back on earth," said Kelly as we sat in his sidewalk apartment, "there were a lot of things that went on I didn't like. If you loved someone, there was hate mixed with it. If you liked some idea—freedom, equal rights, the dig-

nity of man, there was always some person or some institution around that spoiled it. You were always striving for some perfection and yet you knew you could never reach it. But listen, Al, they got it here—perfection." He leaned back with a sigh.

His red-headed Ideal of the Thousand Lights in New York was there. Her name was Valda and she smiled at me and asked if I had shot any more Ideals lately. I grinned a negative and accepted the drink of Sclaris that she mixed. It was perfect.

"The Sclarians are at war with a group from another galaxy, the Philosters," said Kelly. "These star-beings are people like us engaged in a great struggle with the Philostesian forces. But there isn't any stupidity on our side. The Sclarians are all fine people, generous, loving, determined. They respect one another; they never let you down. The women of Sclaris that we call Ideals, once they fall for a man, Sclarian or earth-like, are forever faithful and one hundred per cent in love with you. To me the whole race is perfect good fighting the perfect evil of the Philostersians. I want to join that fight, Al. Only here on the Stardust Overdrive do the true whites and blacks of good and evil exist."

"But you hated Valda back on earth," I pointed out. "Back in the Thousand Lights that night."

"Yes. I hated her because she could be perfect and I knew I couldn't be—I hated my own imperfection. I'm learning. I'm going to stay here and learn to be a Scholarian. In other words, reach perfection of an integrated, happy body and mind, engaged in a worthwhile struggle, dedicated to the forces of good forever."

I leaned back seeing how much we were brothers, feeling how good it was to be on Scholaris. There was a knock on the door and a dark-haired woman came in.

"This is Sandy," said Valda, smiling at me.

I felt better than ever because I had met my Ideal.

"THERE'S one human agony worse than all," said Radwick. We were in the Thousand Lights dining-bar back in New York. "It is to conceive an ideal and then continually fall short of it. That's why the company loses men out in space. On Scholaris a human can be his ideal. It ruins him for earth. His body may be in New York, but his being is out on the Stardust Overdrive, fighting the good fight, living for ideals, experiencing total commitment."

I didn't pay much attention. I

already knew what he meant. All of my life I had yearned for things greater than life. An ideal job, an ideal wife, an ideal struggle to fight and win. It wasn't on earth. It was out on the Drive. Kelly, Radwick and I were fools on earth, cut off from the sensible ones, hating the imperfections. The people for their part rightly hated those ideal men and women of Scholaris.

I watched Sandy coming across the room. The earth people drew back in hate. On earth I felt some of that hate, but I couldn't escape her. She had a body that was delectable—because I had created the thought of it for her to wear. Her face was the face of my dreams because I had dreamed it so. She looked a little like me as an ideal always must. But the red lips, the cream skin, the silken hips and trim ankles, the glorious spun gloss of her dark hair and penetrating beauty of gray-green eyes—these were less than the total appeal.

She wanted me no matter whether or not I wanted her. The ideal love—realizing that she couldn't possibly escape me, no matter how harshly I mistreated her. No matter what I did, she only smiled and came back for more. She followed me like a dog, worried about me, crept into my bed at night to



warm my body, left me alone when I wanted to be alone.

She stood at the table. She was my ideal. But you have to test and retest an ideal. That's why, half in anger half in fear, I stood up and struck her across the face, watching the imprint of my hand in red on the smooth, young cheek. She had the look they all have of patience, of humor, of some exasperation.

"Temper, temper," she said, sitting down with a grin. A near-spaceman at the bar gave her the ogle and the wink and she frosted him with a look. No need to worry about losing her.

But Radwick was smiling a curious smile. He was piling up tiny white sugar cubes on the table. "Ah," he said, "Nothing is greater." Then he leaned over to me and said. "Observe the girl with her back to us over there. The Ideal. The one with the brown hair."

Sandy frowned. "Why would he be interested in another Ideal? Naturally they all come here, as it is one of the few places they are made welcome in your cold, non-idealistic city."

I looked at the Ideal. There was some hint of familiarity in the lines of her profile and the way she smiled at the farspaceman who was with her.

"She could be Valda," I

said. "But they all look much alike."

"She is Valda," said Radwick.

"No," said Sandy, flushing.

"You ask Sandy, Al. She's your ideal and cannot lie to you."

"What about it, Sandy?"

Sandy dropped her wonderful eyes. "Yes," she said. "Valda is somebody else's ideal now, looking a little different."

"But what about Kelly?" I cried. "I thought an Ideal never changed—"

"Kelly was fighting a war out on Sclaris," said Radwick.

"Kelly—dead?"

"You forgot the war," said Radwick. "The fight against the Philosterians that Kelly pledged himself to. Apparently he fought and died for the eternal good."

"But why should she live and go on?" I said in shock, gripped Sandy's arm until she winced.

"An ideal can't die," said Sandy. "When we are killed it is only the person who worshipped us."

Kelly—dead out on the Stardust Overdrive—among the red and blue times and the ringing ideal bells! It was a little too far off and rich, even for me.

"I was thinking of going back to Sclaris myself," I said bitterly. "And maybe fighting."

"You would fight," said Radwick. "You would die. An ideal

must always kill an imperfect man who cannot reach it. Sometimes it is Kelly or the millions of Kellys physically dead in war. Sometimes it is only a part of a man that an ideal kills."

Sandy jumped up so fast that she knocked over a water glass.

"Please, Al, please—"

But it was too late. I saw her glorious hair fade into a dull, ordinary mass. Her arms thickened, her breasts got smaller. Her body shifted under the dress with realistic imperfections. Her skin coarsened. She was still attractive now, but no more so than a thousand other women in New York.

I STOOD up but she had already made the motion to withdraw. "I will manage," she said. "We will say goodbye now. Your perspective has changed and I can no longer stand you."

I said nothing, being too full of new thoughts and feelings. She walked away towards the bar. As she approached she caught the attention of a near space-man and seemed to improve at once. Seemed to regain some of her lost beauty.

"You see how unsatisfactory the Ideals are," said Radwick.

"And yours—"

Radwick gestured at the sugar cubes that were damp now with

the water Sandy had spilled.

"A far-spaceman did the same for me, Al," he said. On the table was a circle of sugar cubes which symbolized the ideal, like an "o". Radwick put his hand in the middle of it and turned his hand pushing the cubes in distortion so they became a zero, or "o". He grinned up at me.

"Nothing is greater," he said, "and we must check in tomorrow for the Overdrive. It's time to go out again."

"I won't be going," I said. "I don't want any more of the Stardust Overdrive."

"Too bad. There is much to learn out there."

I laughed at him playing with his cubes. "Yeah, there's a lot to learn—but we've got it right here too, and a better word for it. Dreams."

He looked up at me quizzically. "Dreams?"

"That's right. You know—'the grass is always greener' stuff. When you get tired of facing reality you can sign on the Stardust Overdrive. Treat yourself to a thrill—the biggest in the cosmos. I've found the answer I was looking for, Radwick, the thing you haven't been able to find with all your mathematical cube symbols. Men stay on the Stardust Overdrive and *with* an Ideal only be-

cause they choose a fantasy life to reality. They *think* they have it better out there on Sclaris. Better? They fight and die just as they would on Earth. The rub comes in when you realize you're only being a sucker for another race—doing what the Sclarians want you to do so they don't have to do it all by themselves. You can have your ideals and deep space thrills. It's a cheap price for your life—just as it was for Kelly."

He kept staring at me and I saw it wasn't sinking in. So I gave him a mock salute. "Think it over, Radwick."

I turned away and he called after me.

"Where are you going?"

I looked back at him and grinned. "I'm going to call up my Ideal—the only one that's real."

I let him chew on that and went to the nearest tele to tell my wife I was home . . .

### THE END



"What do you say we tackle the attic this weekend?"

The patient was obviously deranged, but Dr. Janishefsky had to make sure first. So he sat back in his chair and began to question —

# The Man Who Made The World

By

Richard Matheson

DOCTOR Janishefsky sat in his office. Leaning back in a great leather chair, hands folded. He had a reflective air and a well-trimmed goatee. He hummed a few bars of—"It Ain't Whatcha Do, It's The Way Thatcha Do It." He broke off and looked up with a kindly smile as the nurse entered. Her name was Mudde.

NURSE MUDDIE. Doctor, there is a man in the waiting room who says he made the world.

DOCTOR J. Oh?

NURSE MUDDIE. Shall I let him in?

DOCTOR J. By all means, Nurse Mudde. Show the man in. Nurse Mudde left. A small man entered. He was five foot five wearing a suit made for a man six foot five. His hands were near-hidden by the sleeve ends, his trouser leg bottoms creased sharply

at the shoe tops, assuming the function of unattached spats. The shoes were virtually invisible. As was the gentleman's mouth lurking behind a mustache of mouselike proportions.

DOCTOR J. Won't you have a seat Mr . . .

SMITH. Smith. (He sits)

DOCTOR J. Now.

(They regard each other)

DOCTOR J. My nurse tells me you made the world.

SMITH. Yes. (In a confessional tone) I did.

DOCTOR J. (Settling back in his chair) All of it?

SMITH. Yes.

DOCTOR J. And everything in it?

SMITH. Take a little, give a little.

DOCTOR J. You're sure of this?

SMITH. (*With an expression that clearly says—I am telling the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help me.*) Quite sure.

DOCTOR J. (*Nods once*) When did you do this thing?

SMITH. Five years ago.

DOCTOR J. How old are you?

SMITH. Forty-seven.

DOCTOR J. Where were you the other forty-two years?

SMITH. I wasn't.

DOCTOR J. You mean you started out . . .

SMITH. Forty-two years old. That's correct.

DOCTOR J. But the world is millions of years old.

SMITH. (*Shaking his head*) No. It isn't.

DOCTOR J. It's five years old.

SMITH. That's correct.

DOCTOR J. What about fossils? What about the age of rocks? Uranium into lead. What about diamonds?

SMITH. (*Not to be bothered*) Illusions.

DOCTOR J. You made them up.

SMITH. That's . . .

DOCTOR J. (*Breaking in*) Why?

SMITH. To see if I could.

DOCTOR J. I don't . . .

SMITH. Anyone can make a world. It takes ingenuity to make one and then make the peo-

ple on it think that it's existed for millions of years.

DOCTOR J. How long did all this take you?

SMITH. Three and a half months. World time.

DOCTOR J. What do you mean by that?

SMITH. Before I made the world I lived beyond time.

DOCTOR J. Where's that?

SMITH. No where.

DOCTOR J. In the cosmos?

SMITH. That's correct.

DOCTOR J. You didn't like it there?

SMITH. No. It was boring.

DOCTOR J. And that's why

. . . SMITH. I made the world.

DOCTOR J. Yes. But . . . how did you make it?

SMITH. I had books.

DOCTOR J. Books?

SMITH. Instruction books.

DOCTOR J. Where did you get them?

SMITH. I made them up.

DOCTOR J. You mean you wrote them?

SMITH. I . . . made them up.

DOCTOR J. How?

SMITH. (*Mustache bristling truculently*) I made them up.

DOCTOR J. (*Lips pursed*) So there you were out in the cosmos with a handful of books.

SMITH. That's correct.

DOCTOR J. What if you had

dropped them?

SMITH. (*Chooses not to answer this patent absurdity*)

DOCTOR J. Mister Smith.

SMITH. Yes?

DOCTOR J. Who made you?

SMITH. (*Shakes his head*) I don't know.

DOCTOR J. Were you always like this? (*He points at Mr. Smith's lowly frame.*)

SMITH. I don't think so. I think that I was punished.

DOCTOR J. For what?

SMITH. For making the world so complicated.

DOCTOR J. I should think so.

SMITH. It's not my fault. I just made it, I didn't say it would work right.

DOCTOR J. You just started your machine and then walked away.

SMITH. That's . . .

DOCTOR J. Then what are you doing here?

SMITH. I told you. I think I've been punished.

DOCTOR J. Oh yes. For making it too complicated. I forgot.

SMITH. That's correct.

DOCTOR J. Who punished you?

SMITH. I don't remember.

DOCTOR J. That's convenient.

SMITH. (*Looks morose*)

DOCTOR J. Might it be God?

SMITH. (*Shrugs*) It might.

DOCTOR J. He might have a

few fingers in the rest of the Universe.

SMITH. He might. But I made the world.

DOCTOR J. Enough, Mr. Smith, you did not make the world.

SMITH. (*Insulted*) Yes, I did too.

DOCTOR J. And you created me?

SMITH. (*Concedingly*) Indirectly.

DOCTOR J. Then uncreate me.

SMITH. I can't.

DOCTOR J. Why?

SMITH. I just started things. I don't control them now.

DOCTOR J. (*Sighs*) Then what are you worried about, Mr. Smith?

SMITH. I have a premonition.

DOCTOR J. What about?

SMITH. I'm going to die.

DOCTOR J. So . . . ?

SMITH. Someone has to take over. Or else . . .

DOCTOR J. Or else . . . ?

SMITH. The whole world will go.

DOCTOR J. Go where?

SMITH. No where. Just disappear.

DOCTOR J. How can it disappear if it works independently of you?

SMITH. It will be taken away to punish me.

DOCTOR J. You?

SMITH. Yes.

DOCTOR J. You mean if you

die, the entire world will disappear?

SMITH. That's correct.

DOCTOR J. If I shot you, the instant you died I would disappear?

SMITH. That's . . .

DOCTOR J. I have advice.

SMITH. Yes? You will help?

DOCTOR J. Go to see a reputable psychiatrist.

SMITH. (*Standing*) I should have known. I have no more to say.

DOCTOR J. (*Shrugs*) As you will.

SMITH. I'll go but you'll be sorry about this.

DOCTOR J. I dare say you are already sorry, Mr. Smith.

SMITH. Goodbye. (*Mr. Smith exits. Doctor Janishefsky calls for his nurse over the interphone. Nurse Mudde enters.*)

NURSE M. Yes, doctor?

DOCTOR J. Nurse Mudde, stand by the window and tell me what you see.

NURSE M. What I . . . ?

DOCTOR J. What you see. I want you to tell me what Mr. Smith does after he comes out of the building.

NURSE M. (*Shrugs*) Yes, doctor. (*She goes to the window*)

DOCTOR J. Has he come out yet?

NURSE M. No.

DOCTOR J. Keep watching.

NURSE M. There he is. He's

stepping off the curb. He's walking across the street.

DOCTOR J. Yes.

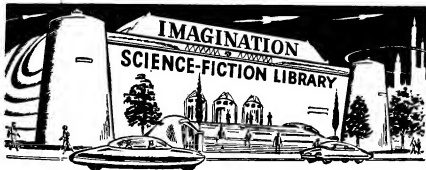
NURSE M. He's stopping now in the middle of the street. He's turning. He's looking up at this window. There's a look of . . . of . . . *realization* on his face. He's coming back. (*She screams*) He's been hit by a car. He's lying on the street . . .

DOCTOR J. What is it, Nurse Mudde?

Nurse M. (*Reeling*) Everything is . . . is *fading*! Doctor Janishefsky, it's fading! (*Another scream*)

DOCTOR J. Don't be absurd, Nurse Mudde. Look at me. Can you honestly say that . . . (*He stops talking. She cannot honestly say anything. She is not there. Doctor Janishefsky who is not really Doctor Janishefsky floats alone in the cosmos in his chair which is not really a chair. He looks at the chair beside him.*) I hope you've learned your lesson. I'm going to put your toy back but don't you dare go near it. So you're bored are you? Scalliwag! You just behave yourself or I'll take away your books too! (*He snorts*) So you made them up, did you? (*He looks around*). How about picking them up, jackanapes!

SMITH. (*Who is not really Smith*) Yes, father.



— REVIEWING CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION BOOKS —

*Conducted by Mark Reinsberg*

**Hard cover science fiction is booming and many fine novels and anthologies are available at all bookstores or by writing direct to the publishers. Each month IMAGINATION will review several titles — candidly — as a guide to your book purchases.**

**TO THE END OF TIME**

by Olaf Stapledon. *Selected and arranged by Basil Davenport.* 775 pages, \$5.00 Funk & Wagnalls, New York.

Perhaps if Spengler or Toynbee had applied their talents to the speculative future rather than the historical past, something like the present volume might have resulted. We have here nothing less than the chronicle of human destiny, splashed against a cosmic backdrop. All the same, we find it monotonous.

Stapledon's writing is a form of philosophical pseudo-prophecy, possible to disagree with but not to disprove. At least not the way Mr. Davenport has set the volume up. Wherever the author dealt with future periods that have already been overtaken such as the 1900's, those

portions have been removed from the book.

Works like Spengler's *Decline of the West* and Toynbee's *A Study of History* may be mistaken in interpretation, but fundamentally they deal with facts, are attempts to organize our fragmentary knowledge of the past. The present work is merely an extension of our ignorance. With the possible exception of *Odd John*, the individual works of Mr. Stapledon were, in this reviewer's opinion, overbearing grandiose and absurd.

Now that all five of the novels on which the author's "reputation" rests—*Last and First Men*, *Star Maker*, *Odd John*, *Sirius*, and *The Flames*—have been gathered into one thick volume, we see no reason to change our original judgment.



### THE TIME MASTERS

by *Wilson Tucker*. 249 pages, \$2.50  
*Rinehart & Company, New York.*

Survivors of a space-wreck are marooned on prehistoric Earth. How they have contributed to the culture and progress of primitive human society, and how some of them are alive and among us today—pursuing their aims unbeknown even to government agents entrusted with a secret Oak Ridge project—provides the material for

a skillfully written mystery novel.

Tucker is especially adept at weaving science-fiction fable into the warp of mankind's most ancient legends and pre-civilized echoes. Readers may find the leap from prologue to first chapter hard to make, and the ending of the book rather enigmatic, but plausibility and suspense never falter, and the appeal to intellectual curiosity is unusually strong.

### SECOND STAGE LENS MEN

by *Edward E. Smith, Ph.D.* 307 pages, \$3.00. *Fantasy Press, Reading, Pa.*

The ancient Greeks considered Homer an essential part of every man's education. Equally basic reading for science-fiction fans are the series of epic space adventures penned by 'Doc' Smith nearly a generation ago, almost all of which are now available in book form.

*Second Stage Lensmen*, the latest novel to be published, stands

fifth in the series which includes *Triplanetary*, *First Lensman*, *Galactic Patrol*, and *Gray Lensman*, and collectively portray the rise of pangalactic civilization and its battle against super intelligent forces.

Protagonists in this Homeric struggle are the wearers of the Lens of Civilization who comprise the Galactic Patrol, while the remorseless Boskonians swallow up entire solar systems with their space armada.

### CHILDREN OF THE ATOM

by *Wilmar H. Shiras*. 216 pages, \$2.75. *Gnome Press, New York.*

Mutant children, normal in outward appearance, but possessing superior intelligence, are discovered by a psychiatrist in the late twentieth century. The children have one thing in common—they are all orphans whose parents were victims of an atomic disaster.

For self-preservation's sake, most of the youngsters have learned to conceal their abnormally high

I. Q.'s from adults and other children. But many have written Broadway hits, scholarly works, and even best-sellers under pen-names.

Story is how the psychiatrist gathers the Wonder Children under one roof, to cultivate their talents and help them adjust to society. Though the idea is plausibly developed, there's not much excitement. The juvenile characters intrigue the psychiatrist more than they will the reader!



*Conducted by Mari Wolf*

THE idea of people wandering around in an alien culture seems to fascinate me. The stories about men and women from the twentieth century who turn up in the thirtieth, or in some super-scientific civilization beyond the Magellanic Clouds, or in some alternate world on the other side of a professor's time warp have always fascinated me most of all. I love to read the parts about where the Earth hero, with nothing but his bare hands, an old Colt .45 he just happened to have along, and his keen insight into personality gained from three years of clerking at Gimbel's manages to overthrow a sinister alien empire, win a war for the Good Denebians, and finally blast triumphantly home to Earth with the most beautiful girl in the universe as his wife.

They remind me a little of the Ray Cummings stories I used to

read wherein a whole atom-universeful of people could blow themselves up into sub mesonic particles, but it didn't matter because the Earth hero and the girl always got safely back to good old 20th century Earth.

Maybe the stories fascinate me because I've never managed to figure out the intricacies of our culture, much less anyone else's. And especially much less that of anyone more advanced technologically, scientifically, and probably psychologically as well.

The really fantastic element in these stories, to me, doesn't lie in the actual plot so much as in the underlying and usually quite taken for granted premise: that anyone scientifically trained and emotionally stable in our society could not only adapt to a more advanced society but actually exercise some control over it. For the hero is

usually, on Earth, quite an ordinary person.

I've tried projecting myself into some of these story situations—a quite acceptable reader-identification experiment. In reality, I work at a rocket testing lab, in the wind tunnel section. Rockets have always been one of my major interests—I've read science fiction for years and years, long before I'd ever heard of any such thing as fandom. I belong to the Pacific Rocket Society and have had some of the best times of my life out in the Mojave Desert on PRS field trips, watching the members static test and flight test their small and un-V-2 creations.

If I were the protagonist of a story, I ought to know everything there is to know about the lab. I should have wormed out all the secrets about the latest missiles being tested, perhaps seen some inventive analogy between this process and that process that would make obsolete everything the lab has been doing. At the very least I ought to be planning how to build and launch a man carrying rocket in order to return to my people on Mars, or wherever else I might have come from.

Instead I've never even seen one of the lab rockets fire.

We work in a department that handles certain types of data. We can go anywhere and have access to anything within that particular department—but just try to get into another one. Security. Our department doesn't build, static test, nor fire rockets. We just work with data obtained after the fact. Not far away people do test rocket motors. Big motors? Little motors? The same types as those re-

leased for public inspection? I don't have the slightest idea.

Several times a day a horn blows, and after a few seconds there's the unmistakable sound of a rocket motor firing. Sometimes it fires smoothly, sometimes it doesn't, sometimes it blows up. That much is easy to tell by the sound. But see them? No.

A few weeks ago I managed to wangle a special invitation to a firing. Unfortunately, the man who invited me had to pass the request up through channels, to his boss who passed it to my boss, who put a foot down immediately. Let one computer go down to the pits? No, it would disrupt things. Maybe, someday, the lab can arrange a guided tour for our whole department.

It hasn't yet.

But in a story the problems, I admit, wouldn't be quite the same. In the first place, in the kind of a story I've been referring to I wouldn't just be employee so and so, bound to my culture and the necessity for earning a living and conforming to the mores of my group. I'd be the focal point of something. I'd be from some other place, or from some other time, and I wouldn't care if I went against 20th century behavior patterns. I wouldn't hang back. I'd go after what I had to go after, the way home, the enemy secret, whatever it was . . .

TO the person going to an inferior culture, to the Yankee in King Arthur's Court, such a casual walking through and over the patterns of the day might be accepted. If I went back to the Dark Ages with a revolver and a

flashlight and perhaps an armored car, I'd probably get along quite nicely indeed. Head magician, unless they took me by surprise and burned me at the stake as a witch.

To get into the inner workings of a culture requires power. The being from the future who came to Earth today, bringing with him force-ray projectors and anti-gravity and completely harnessed atomic power could probably get along quite nicely here, be very well treated indeed as everyone struggled to get him on the proper side. Their side. But how would it work the other way?

I don't think a barbarian from Attila's armies could have much success at taking over the modern world, no matter how brilliant he was and how willing to adapt to his position of being suddenly and inexplicably thrust into it. Even an ancient philosopher might find it disconcerting to be thrown into a world where the ideas he believed in so passionately were now relegated, in large part, to the dusty shelves of libraries. And I don't think I'd do too much better at walking into my great-grandchildren's culture, seeing what a mess it was, and starting right in to put it together again. In fact, I don't think I could even adapt to the situation.

Of course, there may be factors in the story that explain why the Earthman is successful. Perhaps he's a mutant, a latent homo superior, an android, a focal point of magic forces, or really an alien who doesn't know it. Perhaps he's a perfectly ordinary person who just happened to be thrust into a world where the inhabitants aren't quite human, where they lack some universal human trait and are suf-

fering from the lack of it. A story like that is a different case altogether.

But the one that fascinates me is still that of the Earthman, good old Homo Americanus, plunged down into a bewildering world of thought conditioning and hypnotic commands, of forces that act on principles not even dreamed of except in science fiction. Good old Homo Americanus, instantly picking out which side is right and which is wrong, if there's a war on, or what the good and bad facets of the culture itself are, if there isn't a war on. Good old Homo Americanus, hunted and helped and betrayed, not knowing which are his friends and which his enemies, wandering through the political councils of a galaxy and the general staffs of a dozen space fleets—and finally, of course, solving everything.

To his own satisfaction. And, we must suppose, to the beautiful girl's. And to the readers'.

Maybe there's just something wrong with me. I don't believe I'm lacking in imagination, and yet these stories are so completely unreal, so fantastic in a way that the writer never consciously intended them to be. They're not even like the old mythological stories where the culture hero could do everything because he was the child of the gods. The hero of these stories isn't the child of anything except the 20th century and the scientific method — and usually he's up against science that makes ours look pretty elementary.

Maybe you can identify with the protagonist. I can't.

Yet somehow I've never been nearly so fascinated by the stories

of aliens coming here and straightening our world out. Not of course, that the stories about aliens landing on the White House lawn aren't just as readable, and probably just as possible, if you're willing to stretch speculation far enough. But I still prefer it when it's one of us, any well-adapted 20th century person, who does the problem solving.

It seems, somehow, so much more fantastic.

\* \* \*

Now to the fanzines.

PSYCHOTIC: 10c; monthly; Richard E. Geis, 2631 N. Mississippi, Portland 12, Oregon. The first issue of this fanzine, which I reviewed last month, seemed just too good to be true. The cover art was so good, and the editorial really had something to say and said it in good English and a satirical vein that didn't fall fannishly flat.

Now here's the second issue, and it's still too good to be true. Why? It's had to say. For one thing the fanzine looks very neat and uncluttered, pleasing to the eye long before you get into the contents, and this despite the fact that it's dittoed. It's about the most legible ditto I've ever seen—completely legible, in fact.

The editorial, Geis' "The Leather Couch," is to me at least the best editorial you'll find outside the ranks of some of the "little" magazines—and it doesn't have to take a back seat to them either. Geis' comments on professional science fiction are real criticism, not the unthought-out carping you so often find in fanzines. Although in some other fanzine this month there's an article that states that fanzines

should never, in any way, resemble prozines, I can't help wondering just what sort of a pro editor Geis himself would be, if he had the chance. Bet it would be an interesting magazine, whether or not a commercial success.

Larry Balint writes on "Down with Fan Fiction." He's got a point. A lot of fan fiction is bad. Some of it, though, is a lot of fun to read, and I for one enjoy a change from professional styles and professional plots, if the change is handled right. Okay, so maybe only one fan story in twenty is good. There's still that one. And the other writers are at least *writing*, and if you don't write at all you'll *never* sell a story, no matter if you're another Bradbury potentially.

In Psychotic you'll find fiction, poetry, artwork, reviews, and excellent articles. But somehow, in both issues that I've seen, the very best of all are Geis' editorials and Geis' art.

If you've never investigated fanzines, why not start with this one? What a dime's worth . . .

\* \* \*

SCIENCE FANTASY BULLETIN: 20c; monthly; Harlan Ellison, 12701 Shaker Blvd., Apt. 616, Cleveland 20, Ohio. It seems that some of the fanzines of the so-called seventh fandom (a term almost impossible to explain if you're not familiar with the history of the rise and fall of various groups of sf fans) get better and better and better. The Bulletin is a case in point. Editor Ellison has done a fine job with his zine from the beginning, but as time goes on you find more and more in each issue, stories and articles by all the lead-

ing amateurs, and a good many of the leading professionals, in the field.

The issue I have here contains 88 single-spaced mimeographed pages—a prodigious amount of work for anyone to turn out. It has long-time Big Name Fan Redd Boggs' article, "Are You a Pseudo Campbell?", in which Boggs suggests that fanzines shouldn't try to ape prozines in either format or content. It has, itself, quite a professional looking format, with a list of contributors leading off the issue. These contributors include Lester del Rey and L. Sprague de Camp, too. De Camp's article is on the formation of the world convention Rules Committee—especially interesting if you've been to the Conventions.

Del Rey's article is really something. It's called, "And Editors? Well . . . !", and describes his experiences as an editor, complete with some tearing analyses of other well known science fiction personalities. Are the days of the fan feuds dead, or will this article start a super duper one?

All in all, you'll find a lot of material here. Editor Ellison makes a policy of introducing new, and good, fan talent to the field, as well as all the old timers.

\* \* \*

**SCIENCE FICTION ADVERTISER:** 20c; quarterly; Roy Squires, 1745 Kenneth Road, Glendale 1, Calif. The Advertiser ranks right up on top in almost any poll taken of science fiction and fantasy amateur magazines. It is, of course, the place to look if you're a collector and want to add to your book or magazine collection. It's the place to advertise, if you're

breaking up a collection.

It's also, if you're a general reader with nothing to buy or sell, a fine place to read about science fiction.

Here you'll find articles such as Arthur J. Cox's analyses of the works of various sf authors. In this issue Cox writes a definite review of fantastic fiction, its different types and the way in which these types differ basically from each other and from the general body of literature. Like everything that Cox publishes, this article represents a lot of carefully thought out ideas and research on what the sf field actually is.

I think you'll like the editorial, too. This one, "100 Proof Science Fiction, Straight . . . Is It Palatable?", suggests a few concepts that might form the bases for non-terrestrial sciences. How would physics develop among the inhabitants of a multiple star system, for example?

The Advertiser is always a top magazine, and one you shouldn't miss.

\* \* \*

**FAN WARP:** 20c; bimonthly; Lyle Kessler, 2450-76 Avenue, Philadelphia 38, Penna. Here's another new fanzine, this one featuring a lot of pre-11th World Science Fiction Convention goings on. There are articles on Conventions past and present, and Robert Bloch's manual of instructions for the untraveled fan: "How to Attend a Science Fiction Convention." If you're familiar with Bloch you'll know what to expect, and if you aren't, it's about time you were . . .

Alan E. Nourse writes on "Medical Improbabilities of the Future," a relatively overlooked field in sci-

once fiction, and discusses some of the possibilities for tomorrow's medical science. And there's an article by Mari Wolf on "Weightlessness in Space" . . .

There's fiction too, Basil Wells' "Zcalot," a tale of the third world war, and Dave Hammond's satirical story about future history, "Than the Eye."

\* \* \*

**THE CHIGGERPATCH OF FANDOM:** 15c; published irregularly; Bob Farnham, 104 Mountain View Drive, Dalton, Georgia. Here's the fanzine with the slogan, printed right on the front cover: "We irritate some; others ignore us." It's a refreshing zine, with some very good stories and articles.

As a refutation of those who don't like fan fiction, what about Noah McLeod's Bubbette stories? In the issue I have here there's "Bubbette and the Martian," which if it isn't developed along the strong lines of the professional story of its type is nevertheless highly entertaining. McLeod can really create these fantasies about the girl Bubbette and her non-human friends.

There's Garth Bentley's poem, "In Every Port," about the wives the spacer has left behind him. There's a story, billed as true, by John Revans, "Survivor." It's not science fiction or fantasy but a story of a man on a life raft at sea, after his ship has been sunk.

And lots more that, I guarantee, you won't be irritated by or ignore.

\* \* \*

**VEGA:** 10c; bimonthly; Joel Nydahl, 119 S. Front St., Marquette, Mich. Vega is one of a group of relatively new fanzines that are coming more and more to promi-

nence in the amateur sf field. I think it's safe to say that any fanzine which is a member of Fanvariety Enterprises is bound to be an enjoyable one, and Vega's the tops of the lot.

Joel Nydahl has cut down on the fiction in his fanzine, something I consider unfortunate since the stories he published and especially his own, were among the best fanzine stories you'd find. However, the columns and articles are really good, more than a dime's worth of anyone's money, unless you're completely antifan.

The Vega Annish, or anniversary issue, which should be out by the time you read this, promises to have everything the regular issues have and then some. There'll be fiction here, and articles, and satire. The Annish will cost considerably more, 35c, if you haven't been subscribing or submitting to Vega, but subscribers will receive it at the regular price. (Fair enough, since a fan editor can't afford to go all out to attract a one time reader; he publishes his extra special issues for his regular readers, and hopes his fanzine is good enough from issue to issue to hold them and attract more readers from those who send in for a sample copy.)

Why not send in a dime and find out if you, too, want to be a Vega subscriber?

\* \* \*

**BREVIZINE ADVENTURE:** 10c; bimonthly; Warren A. Freiberg, 5018 W. 18th. St., Cicero 50, Ill. Here's a fanzine where you'll often find some good fan fiction, but there's one thing about it that can really rub you the wrong way. The editors blurb each story as if it's the All-American short short, and

after you're read the blurb you're bound to be prejudiced against the story before you even read it. You get a, "Well, it just can't be that good" attitude. And, of course, it can't. If it could, it would be in the prozines.

A lot of the stories are enjoyable too. Some of them even show real promise; some of the writers might really rate a blurb one of these days. But a story ballyhooed to the effect that Ray Bradbury and John Collier had better move over, because here's someone who's their peer, is hardly conducive to making a reader like *that* writer.

Why do it? The stories would fare much better on their own.

\* \* \*

**FANTASY TIMES:** 10c; published twice a month; James V. Taurasi, 137-03 32nd. Ave., Flushing 54, N. Y. The newspaper of science fiction tried something new recently—it published a complete issue about one individual. Which individual? Mr. Science Fiction, or Forrest J. Ackerman. It was an interesting and most readable departure, and one that might be followed from time to time in the future if reader response is sufficiently favorable.

Here's the fanzine where you'll find out all the news of the science fiction world, all about the personalities of stf, what they're writing, painting or editing. All about the magazines and books and movies that feature the medium, including reviews of what programs you ought to catch on your TV and radio and what motion pictures might interest you.

If you really want to be on the inside of this science fiction world, you won't want to miss Fantasy-

Times. Try it and see.

\* \* \*

**SCINTILLA:** 10c; Larry Anderson, 2716 Smoky Lane, Billings, Montana. This fanzine, published at irregular intervals, is a rather gay and fannish publication that carries a lot of letters from the readers and seems very friendly all around.

In the copy I have here there's a story by Robert W. Gail entitled "Cosmic Twins," that's billed as a 5,000 word novel. Now, even though 5,000 words scarcely constitutes a novel, it does make up a rather long story for a fanzine. It's all about Earthmen slaves revolting against their Venusian overlords, and alas and alack, it ends on a punch line...

There's quite a review section on other fanzines here too.

\* \* \*

**STARFARER:** 25c; Henry Oden, 2317 Myrtle St., Alexandria, Louisiana. This one used to be 15c, but the price has gone up with this copy. Seems a little steep, as it's neither of exceptional quantity nor exceptional quality. And besides, one *always* loses money on a fanzine. Rules of the game.

This issue is full of light hearted spoofing of the 11th World Science Convention, (the spoofing written pre-Conventionally.) There are cartoon type drawings, gags, and a picture article on how to build your own duplicator. (A duplicator is the machine that turns out a purple inked fanzine such as Starfarer.)

It's obvious that the people who put this one out enjoy themselves doing it. But why not sell it for a bit less?

\* \* \*

**WHISPERING SPACE:** Val Walk-



er. 6438 E. 4th Place, Tulsa, Okla. This new one is sent out free to anyone who wants a sample. It's a hectoed zine, with fiction and articles and a feud-corner in case anyone wants to start an argument. It's obviously a very young fanzine; in fact it tells you that it's not a professional fanzine at all.

Whispering Space wants material, as well as contact with other Oklahoma fans. So if you live in the area, and feel like working on a new zine, why not take Val up on it?

\* \* \*

**OPERATION FANTAST:** Capt. K. F. Slater, 13 Gp. R.P.C., B.A.O.R., 29, c/o G.P.O., England. If you're interested in joining an international science fiction-fantasy organization, one complete with correspondence clubs, a circulating library, and lots of services to its members, you'd do well to drop a line to Capt. Slater. If you subscribed for a year you'd be receiving four issues of Operation Fan-

tast, one of the most interesting fanzines extant, plus the annual OF Handbook, which covers fan activities all over the world, plus any newsletters the club puts out during the year. A subscription, and membership in OF, is 75c.

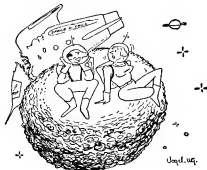
No matter where you live in the English speaking world there's probably some OF member not too far away. For the fan who lives outside the main areas of fan activities a group of this sort could be especially rewarding.

They're very interesting people, and you'd get to know a lot of them from a lot of places, as penpals and fellow members of a big international fandom.

\* \* \*

That's about all there's room for this time. So, until next month, and the next BOX, keep on sending those fanzines. Just send them to me, Mari Wolf, *Fandora's Box*, IMAGINATION, P. O. Box 230, Evanston, Illinois.

—Mari Wolf



"Can't you just imagine a cartoon about us and a lot of kids being rescued a couple of years from now?"

# Letters

## from the Readers

### HIS BIG DISCOVERY

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I've a confession to make. I picked up IMAGINATION because the magazine I usually buy hadn't arrived. Boy, was I surprised when I discovered what a great science fiction magazine IMAGINATION is. The November issue had the finest selection of stories combined into one magazine that I have ever seen. If all issues are as good, Madge is my number one magazine from now on!

Larry Sparman  
813 Jasmine  
McAllen, Texas

*Now that you've finally discovered Madge, you'll want to catch up on some back issue reading, Larry. You'll find a handy order blank on page 161. And of course, don't miss any coming issues either! . . . with*

### TEARS . . . OF JOY!

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I just finished reading THE MU-

SIC MASTER in the November issue. I'm not ashamed to say that I cried. It was such a lovely ending; it could not have ended any other way and left the same effect. It's a story I can read many times and never lose interest.

The rest of the stories were as good as usual—and I always was a Heinlein fan!

Thanks again for that wonderful story.

A/3Mary L. Wilkerson  
AA8606198  
1812thAACS Grp.  
APO 29, c/o PM  
New York, N. Y.

*Once in awhile a story will convey a deep feeling of emotion. Such a story was F. L. Wallace's THE MUSIC MASTER. We're glad you liked it so well—and it had much the same effect on us . . . with*

### HEY, TOFFEE!

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Well, Madge has done it again! THE TIME ARMADA by Fox B. Holden was one of the best written

stories I've ever read—and that's saying a lot considering Madge's stories! Also, in the November issue, **SKY LIFT** by Robert Heinlein, was very good, along with **THE MUSIC MASTER**.

One thing, though. What about another **TOFFEE** story. Remember, you promised us one. I'll keep yelling for **TOFFEE** stories until I get them. I hope you come through with one before I get hoarse yelling, Toffee! Toffee! **TOFFEE!**

Louis R. Buchwald

2917 5th Ave. S.

Minneapolis 8, Minn.

*Ok, we heard you, Louie. And the good news is that Charles Myers has completed a new TOFFEE novel. You'll be seeing it in the near future. So sit back on your pins and needles and yell—with joy! . . . with*

## SERIAL FELL FLAT

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Just finished reading **ROLL OUT THE ROLOV!** by Harry Crosby in the November Madge, and I feel I must write and tell you how much I enjoyed the story. At the same

time I am a little disappointed in not finding my letter on "Why I Read Science Fiction" a winner. But I will say this much, the three winning letters in the Reader Section were wonderfully eloquent and extremely sincere. My heartiest congratulations to the writers.

A word about Fox B. Holden's two-part serial, **THE TIME ARMADA**. To be blunt, I couldn't see it. I did not like the first part (I stopped reading after a few pages) and therefore the November issue was short-lived for me as I did not read the concluding part. With Madge so dear to my heart, this is my only gripe, so other than serials, keep up the splendid work with the greatest science fiction magazine available anywhere — **IMAGINATION!**

Eugene McGovern

1028 W. Indiana Ave.

Philadelphia 33, Pa.

*THE TIME ARMADA had a slow opening, Gene, but then it was a book-length novel, and required careful development. But after the first few pages the story really begins to roll, so do us a favor and read the novel—then let us know what you think about it. We*

# BOOKS!

# BOOKS!

# BOOKS!

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## READERS' SERVICE BOOK CLUB

119 E. San Fernando St., Dept. I-2, San Jose 13, California

*are willing to bet you'll write us a rave letter! . . . . . with*

## DIG THIS SKY BOY!

Dear Mr. H:

Just got back from an exciting galactic tour where I enjoyed sight-seeing the Universe . . . It's a good thing I came home when I did or maybe the newsstands would have been sold out of the November issue of Madge!

Well, I got my copy and scooted right out to some distant star to read it in peace. "Mr. S-F" Heinlein's SKY LIFT was the MOST, to say the least. Real cool and crazy! Enjoyed the prize-winning letters too. Real great!

THE TIME ARMADA'S conclusion sure took a load off my mind!

Also devoured FANDORA'S BOX, the letter column in general, etc. I always enjoy them tremendously.

The rest of the stories, for the most part, were just plain terrific.

Although I read most of the "slick" s-f magazines, none of them top Madge for personality, artwork, or just good stories.

Jerry Anthony  
82 Highland St.

New Bedford, Mass.

*If you're planning any extended interstellar voyages, Jerry, you better send in your subscription to Madge so you won't miss any of the fun. We've made special arrangements with Stellar Mail Services to get Madge complete Space coverage. A stupendo deal, so fill out the coupon on page 162 right now! . . . . . with*

HE WANTS ACTION!

Dear Mr Hamling:

First, my apologies. I've never written to an editor before, so if I bollux this up please excuse me!

Second, Madge. Time out while I try to think of some adjectives to describe what I think of the magazine? Stupendous? Not good enough. Excellent? Too weak an adjective. Ah, well, in my opinion nothing in science fiction compares with Madge! All I can say is that IMAGINATION is THE MOST!—You'll find my subscription enclosed to back up my opinion.

See if you can't dig up some stories with plenty of action in them. That's what I like—action! Not that I don't like other types of stf stories, not by a long shot. It's just that I like action stories the best.

That's about it for now. Again, Madge is THE MOST! Keep it that way.

Keith Strong

559 Mulvey Ave.

Winnipeg, Man., Canada

*No sooner said than done, Keith. Read PLANET OF DREAD in this issue and let us know if it's got enough action for you. We can supply plenty more—ok? . . with*

## AN EDITORIAL ORCHID . . .

Dear Bill Hamling:

Tonight I picked up the November issue of your magazine—I should also add that I feel IMAGINATION is my magazine too! As I read your editorial I received inspiration from the fact that I am now sure that there are some editors alive who will still uphold the values of the code of journalism.

It took a lot of guts to come out with the ideals that you personally expressed in your editorial. It was wonderful. I know that you won a large number of friends and fans in this barracks, who will continue to be so, as long as you continue to think and write. I speak of course of the wonderful expression you gave to readers' resentment of "negative" literature.

During these times when we must fight for the very principles for which we exist it is disgusting and discouraging to note the number of publications that "give in" to the literary germs. As long as the American Press, and its representatives, continues to model the ideas which you expressed so well, then I know that we shall be reminded of our duties if the time comes when open defense of our principles at home becomes necessary.

Pfc. Francis E. Wehrly  
1120187, USMCR  
MTACS-3 MACG-3  
MCAS El Toro  
Santa Ana, Cal.

*Our humble thanks for your kind words; rest assured that Madge will always follow the editorial line our readers have come to expect. We may not sell a million copies in the near future, but there isn't one we're ashamed of. Good science fiction is our policy, and it will remain that way . . . . . wth*

#### OLD TIME FAN

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I noted in FANDORA'S BOX in Madge that many young teenagers consider themselves old when they have been in fandom three or

four years. Here's a report from the "older" group of space adventure fans.

I looked upon my first "flying machine" at an Old Settler's reunion held at Columbus, Kansas, during the year 1910. It was a tent, exhibited at twenty-five cents for adults, ten cents for kids. I have been a space fan ever since!

At the time I went home and built a two-foot model, a tri-plane made of split bamboo sticks and covered by old feed sacks. I was nine at the time. Then I scribbled a story about an *aeroplane flyer* who got himself sucked up to the Moon in a warm air shaft . . . (Hyperspace vac-tunnel as we'd call it today!) My, how times have changed. Then it was bi- and triplane crates. Now, jets and rocket ships. Then, Jules Verne. Now, IMAGINATION.

I have no brickbats or scallions for science fiction in general. And a beautiful orchid for Madge!

E. R. Kirk  
Box 462  
Buffalo, Mo.

*Today IMAGINATION, tomorrow the stars. Any bets on this century? . . . wth*

#### NEW BUT CONFIRMED

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I picked up my first copy of Madge a couple of days ago and I want you to know how much I enjoyed it. It was a story by my favorite author, Robert A. Heinlein, that sold me a copy of the November issue. While SKY LIFT is certainly not his best, I thought it was very good.

THE MUSIC MASTER, in my estimation, is a true masterpiece.

From now on I'll keep my eyes open for stories by F. L. Wallace, although I don't think I'll ever find another I enjoyed as much as this one.

I enjoyed **THE TIME ARMADA** by Fox B. Holden very much. Thank heavens no one has ever seriously considered the method outlined to prevent wars and keeping the population controlled!

I hope all Madge's issues are as good as the November one, because you have gained my enclosed subscription on the strength of just one issue!

Jack Mayo  
2106 Tudor Place  
Raleigh, N. C.

*Welcome into the fold, Jack. You'll find that every issue of Madge is a science fiction event. That's one limb we'll crawl way out on! . . . with*

#### FANDOM'S LAST FRIEND . . .

Dear Bill:

November issue of **IMAGINATION** bought and appreciated. I was wondering if Heinlein had pushed a second-rate story on you, but I should have known that Heinlein just doesn't write second-rate stories. So give **SKY LIFT** the first place vote by light years!

Frank M. Robinson was also good as usual with his **GUARANTEED—FOREVER! THE MUSIC MASTER** placed a strong third.

Well, Bill, it looks like you're about the only friend the fan has left among the science fiction editors. **FANDORA'S BOX** fills a great need for fandom. If Madge were to desert us . . .

I liked the way you came out in your editorial and stated what

kind of stories you want. At least you seem to **KNOW** what you want and what you are doing. Which is something many editors haven't the knack for. Even, perhaps, if I don't agree with you all the way down the line, I like the way you said it. I do think there should be a place in Madge for the sociological type story. Indeed, what was **THE MUSIC MASTER**?

Val Walker  
6438 East 4th Place  
Tulsa, Okla.

***FANDORA'S BOX** is a popular feature with most of our readers, Val. We're glad about that too, as fandom can only grow if people know about its varied activities, and that's what Mari Wolf's column is for. As to our editorial, we weren't stating our story preferences so much as we were those of our readers. The "sociological" story will be welcome in Madge—just like any other story—if it is good enough. Too many stories are high-brow in nature — they leave you wondering what happened at the end. We think a story should always be resolved, preferably with a happy ending — that's what our readers want, and we're in business to please! **THE MUSIC MASTER** may have had a sociological theme, but it was first and foremost a good—and complete—story . . . with*

#### A BIG THIRD REASON!

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Another first! I mean this letter to the editor and the story, **THE TIME ARMADA**. It was well worth waiting for the concluding part in the November issue. Especially when you have a subscription.

I received a Xmas subscription to Madge a couple of years ago, and I wouldn't be without it!

Having read science fiction for eight years, I have been having a mental debate with myself about the reasons why I read it. Have just arrived at three conclusions: 1. It is a mild form of escape (pleasant, that is); 2. It is a stimulation for my mind, and an outside interest to add to my house-keeping and being a 23 year old mother of three active sons; 3. I believe implicitly that someday we will leave our small speck of earth and journey far, far into new adventures. I hope to *really* go to the Moon—and have even begun interesting my five year old son in rockets as I hope he will get there if I don't!

One of the main reasons I wrote this letter was to voice my opinion of Madge's covers — favorably — and put in a bid for more Malcolm Smith photo-covers.

All in all, if Madge progresses as much in the coming year as she has in the past one, you'll have to put her out weekly!

Mrs. Harold C. Smith, Jr.  
Hughes Rd.  
Poolesville, Md.

*You many not get to the Moon yourself, but you can bank on the fact that you will see men from Earth land there — and in less than two decades! Too, your son may grow up into a new career—space pilots! Science fiction? Only for the moment . . . . . with*

## FROM FICTION TO FACT

Dear Mr Hamling:

This is the first time I have ever written to any science fiction mag-

azine. Your November issue was also the first issue of IMAGINATION I've read. I think it is the best one on the market! In the November issue I especially liked the short stories, THE MUSIC MASTER, and GUARANTEED—FOREVER!

I've been reading science fiction and fantasy for six years and have witnessed its refinement over that period. I, like others, was often ridiculed for reading that "tripe". I defended my choice of literature to the hilt!

In regard to this I guess the primary reason I read s-f is entertainment and relaxation. During my five years of college training I've always carried a heavy schedule, so periodically I needed to relax. It was then I would turn to science fiction for an escape from "true" science into the fictional variety.

And yet, is it so fictional? In 1948 I bought a collection of old sf magazines dating from 1939. One of them had a story in which the villain was eliminated via the atom bomb! Since then I've noted electronic brains, "robot" factories, and numerous other mechanical masterpieces that have suddenly come true to life!

Gerald L. Wibbelsman  
5833 Ferris Ave.  
St. Louis, Mo.

*Beating science to the punch is old stuff to science fiction, Gerald. Why TV was being written about by sf authors as a casual thing back in the twenties! Of course, the big thing that will excite the world is when science finally gets around to our pet baby, space flight. When that time comes—and soon— we'll be hard pressed to keep the fiction*

*angle ahead of fact! . . . . with*

## PUBLIC RELATIONS . . .

Dear Bill:

This will interest you. Recently I took a back issue of *Madge* to school—the September 1952 number. I happened to be reading the magazine in my English class and one of my classmates suggested that the teacher read one of the stories to the class. She agreed, and asked me which story was best—naturally I said Daniel Galouye's DANGEROUS DOLL.

The students enjoyed the story so much they told members of other English classes about it. The result was that the story was read in two other classes. I now have a rather shopworn copy, but also the satisfaction that many who used to sneer at science fiction suddenly recognized the fact that there were interesting stories obtainable.

And while we're on the subject of science fiction in school, my teacher now allows us to report on stf books, and themes of a science fictional nature are also acceptable. As an afterthought, I have been able to maintain a 98 average in English class!

Too, working in the school library, I have managed to talk the librarian into ordering a number of science fiction novels each year for the school library. And I've managed to get science fiction into the history classes—giving talks on the history of science fiction.

I've even managed to smuggle stf into math classes via technical arguments with the instructor. Then there's the school paper . . .

You can see that science fiction

promotion isn't lacking here in Baird!

Lee Huddleston  
Route 1  
Baird, Texas

*Looks like we're going to have to send you a batch of subscription blanks for Madge, Lee. Pass them around the school, huh? But seriously, we think this sort of promotion for stf is a fine thing, and we only hope other students will follow your lead throughout the land. How about it, gang! . . . . with*

## MILDLY SOUR GRAPES

Dear Bill:

I'd like to comment about the November issue. First of all I want to say what I thought of the Heinlein story. It was good. Period. I still don't think it deserved feature billing, even after reading all your advance notices that "we're going to have a HEINLEIN story." So what? I admit I like Heinlein, but that advance billing sure left me cold. It's about time you editors realize that Heinlein is not the only one who can write top drawer science fiction.

Second, I'd like to comment on THE TIME ARMADA. That too was a good story. A bit space-op'erish, but a good story.

Finally, I'll give you a pat on the back for inserting staples in *Madge*. But one just isn't enough. You should have two!

That's about all, except one thing: Get that lettering OFF the cover!

Don Wegars  
2444 Valley St.  
Berkeley 2, Cal.

*Who said Heinlein was the only writer of top drawer stf? We con-*



sider every story in Madge to be top drawer material. But only one story is featured on our cover each month so naturally when Heinlein appeared he got the top billing. Why not, he's earned the right to be featured! So what's this qualification you put on *THE TIME ARMADA*? A good story but a bit "space-operish" . . . Since when isn't a space adventure good stuff? We'll take it any day over high-brow sophisticated prattle. And anyway, Holden's novel was not space opera in the sense you imply. We like the one staple idea—not because it saves money because the additional cost is trivial, but because it allows you to keep the book further open top and bottom as you read. And what's this about the lettering on the cover? You mean

the featured story title? Come off it, pal, that's a necessary bit of issue plugging—not for the steady buyer, but for the casual reader who has to be interested before he picks up the book. Sometimes a catchy cover title will do the trick. Strictly a commercial factor that we're stuck with — although you will have noted that Madge tries to work a cover title into the cover itself wherever possible. Along those lines we'll be having a couple of interesting covers for you shortly . . . Which about winds up shop for this month, gang. Get your letters in early after reading this issue, because the letters received the quickest stand a better chance of getting into this department. But of course, we always want to hear from you—any time! . . . wkh

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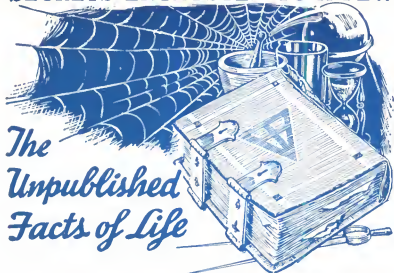
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# How I foxed the Navy

by Arthur Godfrey

The Navy almost scuttled me. I shudder to think of it. My crazy career could have ended right there. Who knows, I might still be burning Chesterfields instead of selling them.

To be scuttled by the Navy you've either got to do something wrong or neglect to do something right. They've got you both ways. For my part, I neglected to finish high school.

Ordinarily, a man can get along without a high school diploma. Plenty of men have. But not in the Navy. At least not in the U. S. Navy Materiel School at Bellevue, D. C., back in 1929. In those days a bluejacket had to have a mind like Einstein's. And I didn't.

"Godfrey," said the lieutenant a few days after I'd checked in, "either you learn mathematics and learn it fast or out you go. I'll give you six weeks." This, I figured, was it. For a guy who had to take off his shoes to count



above ten, it was an impossible assignment.

I was ready to turn in my bell-bottoms. But an ad in a magazine stopped me. Here, it said, is your chance to get special training in almost any subject—mathematics included. I hopped on it. Within a week I was enrolled with the International Correspondence Schools studying algebra, geometry and trig for all I was worth.

Came week-end liberty, I studied. Came a holiday, I studied. Came the end of the six weeks, I was top man in the class. Within six weeks I had mastered two years of high school math, thanks to the training I'd gotten.

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